ROOMFUL OF BLUES ☆ JARED JAMES NICHOLS ☆ THE COMMONERS ☆ BISON HIP ☆ ZAC SHULZE ☆ AL BASILE ☆ HAYES CARLL ☆ MUD MORGANFIELD ☆ DAVE SINCLAIR 4 ☆ BURNING ROPE

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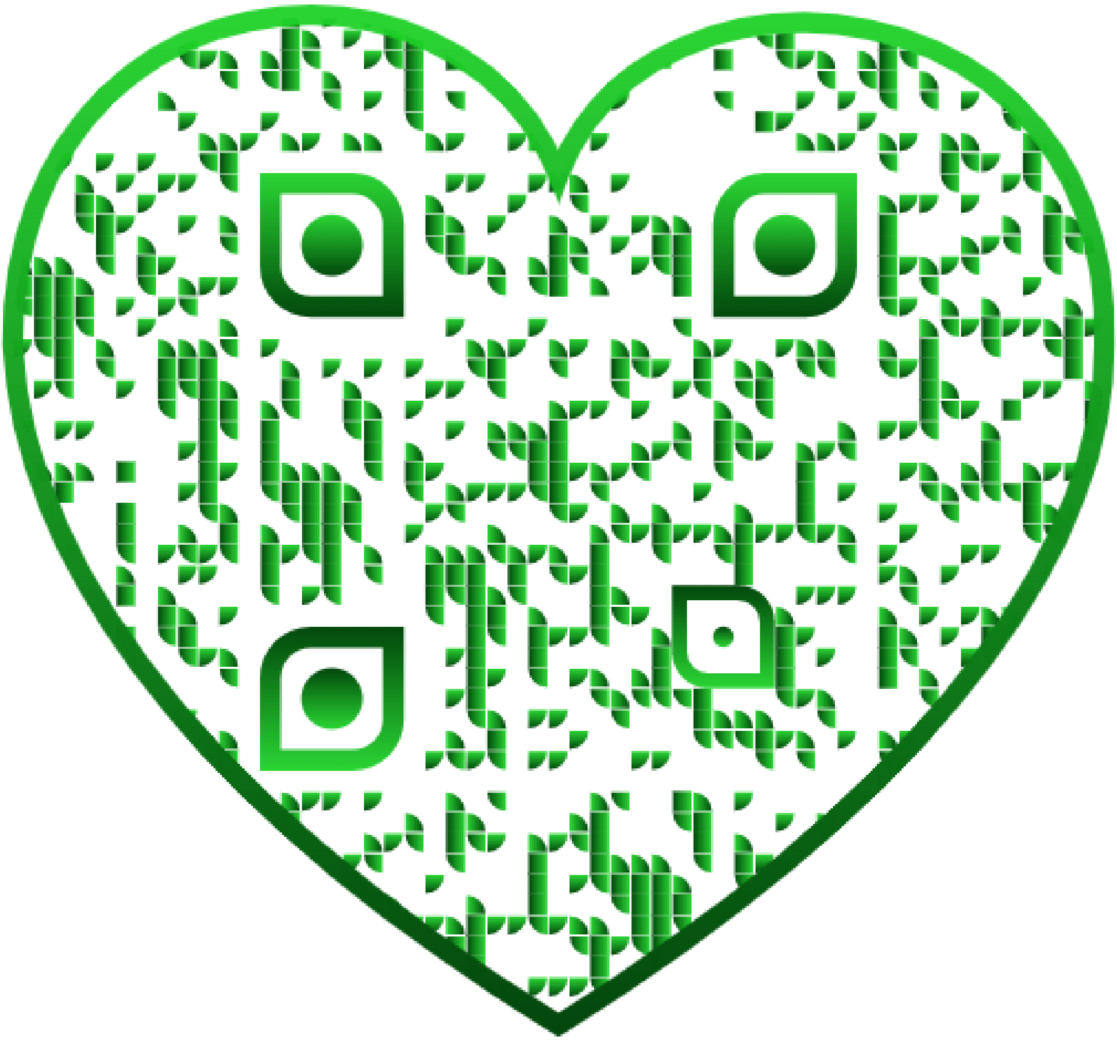
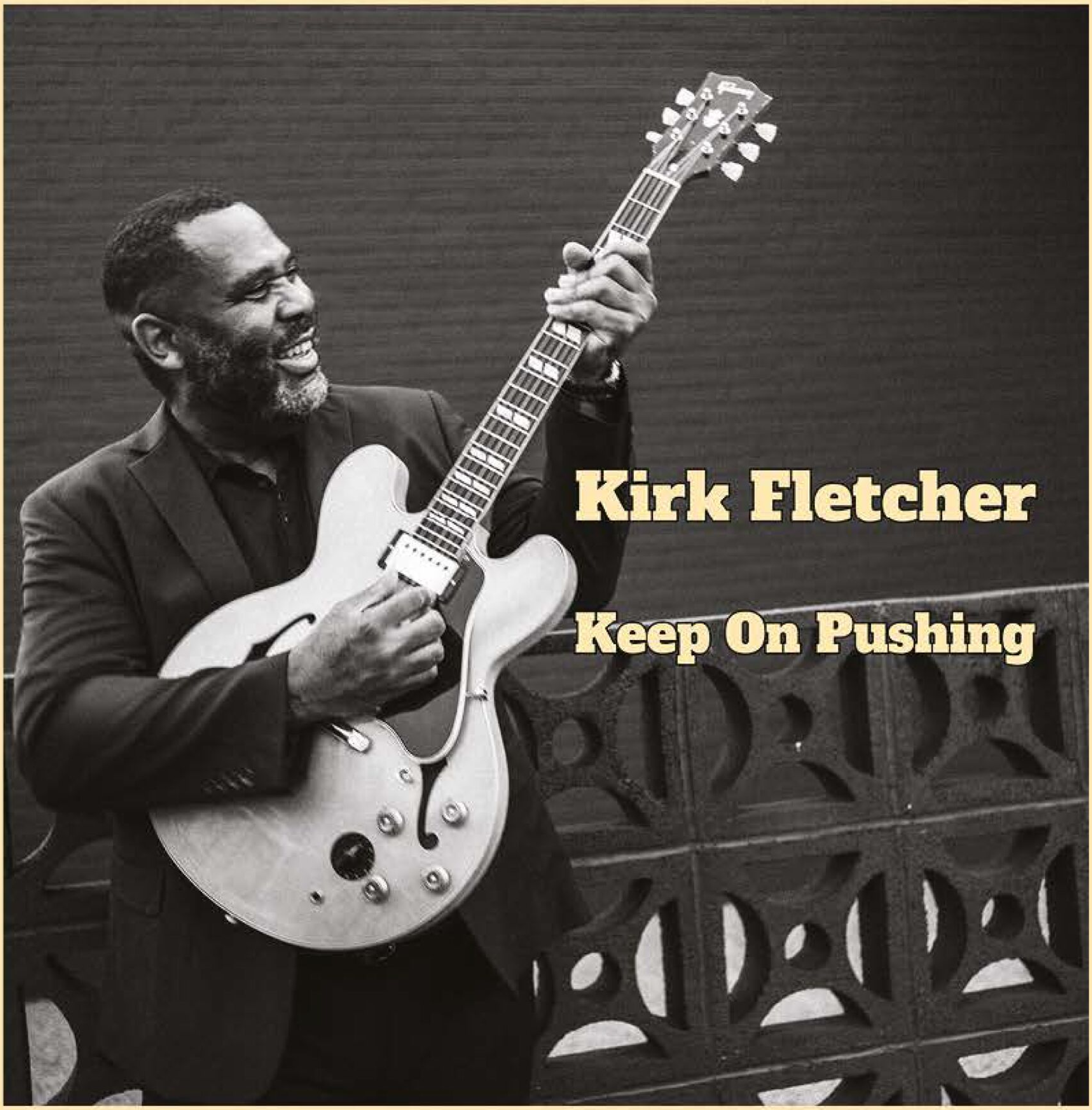
KIRK FLETCHER

“THE BLUES IS WHY I DO ALL OF THIS”



KIRK FLETCHER
KEEP ON PUSHING



KEEP ON PUSHING is the latest from internationally hailed guitarist/vocalist Kirk Fletcher. Working with co-producer JD Simo and a dream team of Nashville players, Fletcher calls it "a positive message for these uncertain times we live in."

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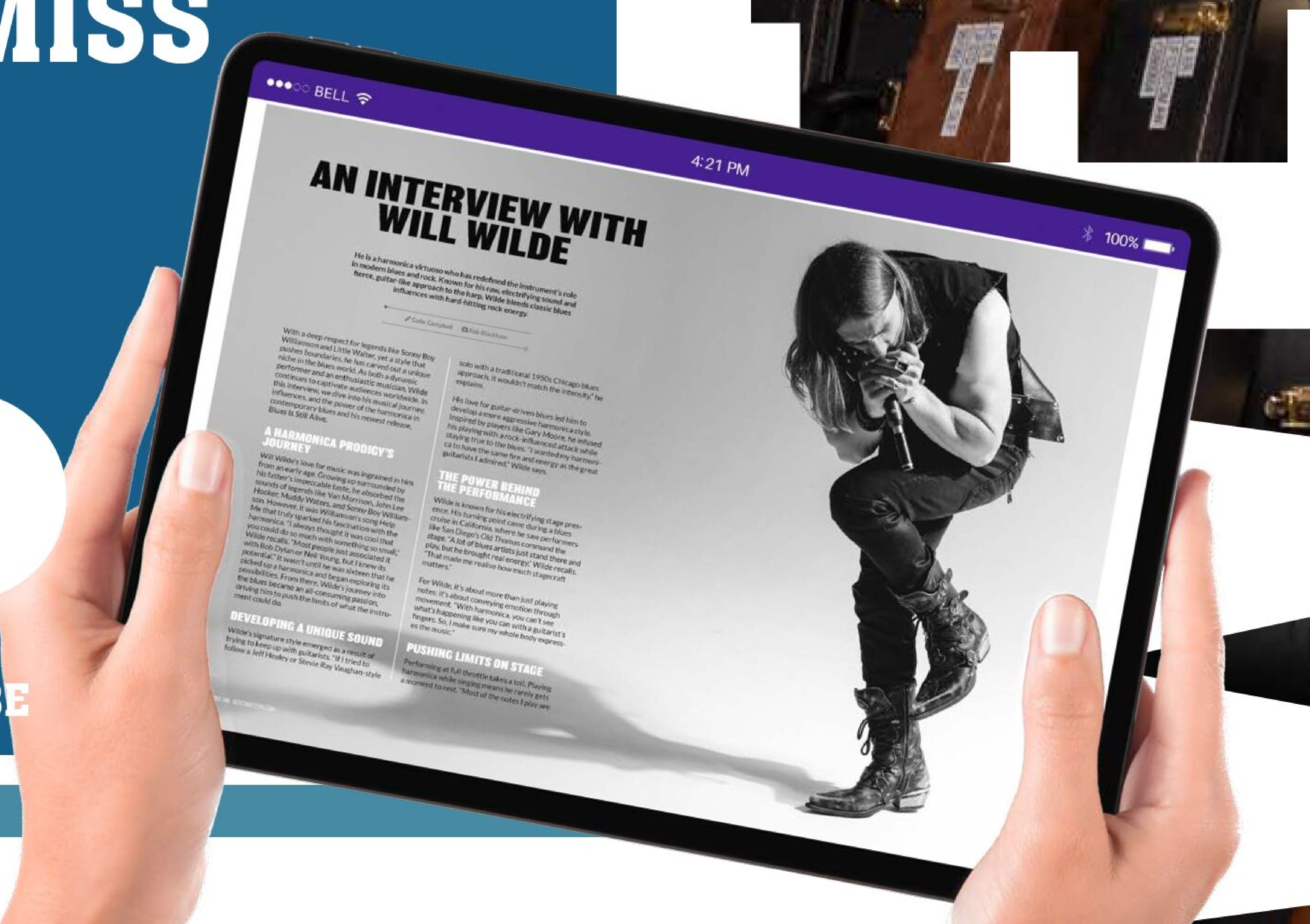

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AL BASILE

HE'S GOT THE BLUES IN HAND!

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Al Basile is a rare figure in the blues world, he is a masterful cornet player, eloquent songwriter, and storyteller whose career has spanned decades without ever losing its creative spark.

Colin Campbell Meghan Sepe

From his early work as the first trumpet player in Roomful of Blues to his acclaimed solo albums that blend jazz, blues, and soul, Basile has carved out a singular path defined by intelligence, wit, and deep musicality. With Grammy nominations, multiple Blues Music Award nods, and a reputation for lyrical craftsmanship, he stands as both a torchbearer of tradition and an innovator pushing the genre forward. Blues Matters caught up to discuss his musical journey and his new release, Blues In Hand.

FROM SWING RECORDS TO THE CORNET

Growing up in Rhode Island, Basile's home wasn't filled with music. But a small collection of 78s, Harry James, Benny Goodman, lit a fire of enthusiasm for him. "I liked a Harry James record with Frank Sinatra singing All or Nothing at All, and that's why I picked the trumpet at age eight," he recalled. "I didn't know then how important singing and phrasing would become for me later." Though he studied classical trumpet, Basile put it aside in college. It wasn't until he met friends like Duke Robillard and Scott Hamilton in the early '70s that he returned to the horn, this time embracing improvisation. "Ever since 1971, when I picked it up again, I've just kept going," he said.

WHY CORNET?

Most ask why not the trumpet. Basile's answer is simple: the cornet felt right. "It has a mellower, rounder tone that appealed to me. I see the horn as an alternate voice, like a singer. That's how Louis Armstrong approached it, and he's been my pole star ever since."

Armstrong wasn't just a musical revelation; he was a model of stagecraft. "He radiated joy despite everything he went through," Basile reflected. "That ability to connect with an audience, to look them in the eye and give them joy, that stuck with me."

THE BREAKTHROUGH: ROOMFUL OF BLUES

Basile's first foray on stage came through jam sessions with Scott Hamilton, but his true break came when Duke Robillard invited him into Roomful of Blues in 1973, he was the band's first trumpet player. "Roomful was like a different kind of grad school," Al said. "Three hundred dates a year, always on the bus, always in front of audiences. That experience was priceless. "He remembers one night in particular at Sandy's in Beverly, Massachusetts. "We were backing up Helen Humes, and Count Basie walked in with his wife. Nobody knew but me because I was closest to the door. The manager whispered, 'Basie's in the audience—tell the band.' I didn't tell them. We finished the set, and then Basie came out of the shadows and told us, 'You guys are swinging.' That was one of the great moments of my life."

LESSONS AND LONGEVITY

When asked about the best advice he ever received, Basile didn't hesitate. "Keep playing. Play the tunes you love, and eventually you'll learn how to play. The musicians I grew up with; Duke, Scott, none of them went to music school.

They taught themselves and when you teach yourself, you come out sounding like you, not like everyone else practicing scales. That individuality is the heart of the blues." Basile himself had to learn to unlearn. Trained to read music, he initially saw notes in his head as he played. "It was like the Mills Brothers bouncing ball," he laughed. "It took me decades to shake that. Now I play by ear."

THE PRODUCER'S CHAIR

In recent years, Basile has expanded beyond performance into production. His independent label, Sweet Spot Records, has released 20 albums over 25 years.

His latest project, Blues in Hand, finds him fully in control. "I wrote the songs, did the arrangements, played, sang, produced, it's my record through and through. If you think it stinks, blame me," he chuckled.

The pandemic gave him unexpected time to practice, lengthening his solos and refining his sound. "I don't tour much, so this record really shows where I am now."

A POET WITH A HORN

Beyond music, Basile is also a published poet and playwright. His approach to words mirrors his music: direct, honest, and performed with connection in mind. "Whether it's a poem, a horn solo, or a song, the audience should feel I'm glad to be there," he said. "That joy, that's the lesson Armstrong gave me, and I try to carry it on."

THE CRAFT OF SONGWRITING

When it comes to songwriting, Al Basile has done it all. A multi-instrumentalist, singer, poet, playwright, and former Roomful of Blues horn man, his approach to creating songs is steeped in discipline, craft, and inspiration. "I've done it every way," Basile begins.

"Back in college I wrote musicals with a partner who was the composer. Sometimes he'd write the music first and I'd have to fit my lyrics into it. The next year, I flipped it on him, I wrote all the lyrics first and he had to follow me. Later, when I learned to write my own music, I developed the method I use most often now. Usually, it's a lyric idea, most often the hook, the phrase that repeats and sums up the song. I'll hear the rhythm that carries that phrase, and from there the melody and harmony follow. By the time I've finished, I've also written the bass lines and horn parts. Those are locked in because they're written to answer the vocal. The guitarist and keyboard player get more freedom, but the foundation is precise."

For Basile, songwriting is both architecture and emotion, each piece designed to fit together but always rooted in feeling.

WORKING WITH KID ANDERSEN

Blues Matters asked about guitarist and producer Kid Andersen, a key collaborator on Basile's recent projects. Their connection began at the Blues Awards in Memphis. Andersen, leading the house band, reached out to Basile to help back up the late soul singer Willie Walker. "That's how we got to know each other," Basile recalls. Since then, the two have developed a seamless long-distance partnership. "We record the rhythm section and vocals here, then send the tracks to Kid on the West Coast. He adds his guitar from his home studio. You'd never guess we're 3,000 miles apart, it sounds like we're all in the same room. That's Kid's brilliance, both as a guitarist and a producer."

SONGS OF EXPERIENCE

Much of Basile's latest record carries a deep personal weight. Tracks like All Your Lies, Leave It All Behind You, and When You Lose Your Money are born from lived experiences.

"Some songs come from characters I invent," he explains, "but others are drawn from my own life. All Your Lies: that's me addressing someone who was a big part of my life until I discovered everything I'd been told was false. At least I got a song out of it."

Asked if When You Lose Your Money was autobiographical, Basile laughs. "I won't get into numbers, but let's just say I have the authority to write and sing that song now. I wouldn't have been able to do it a few years ago. Loss, whether it's money, love, or trust, has been part of my journey, and the blues is the best way to get it off your chest."

SINGING THE TRUTH

The conversation turns philosophical when discussing authenticity in singing.

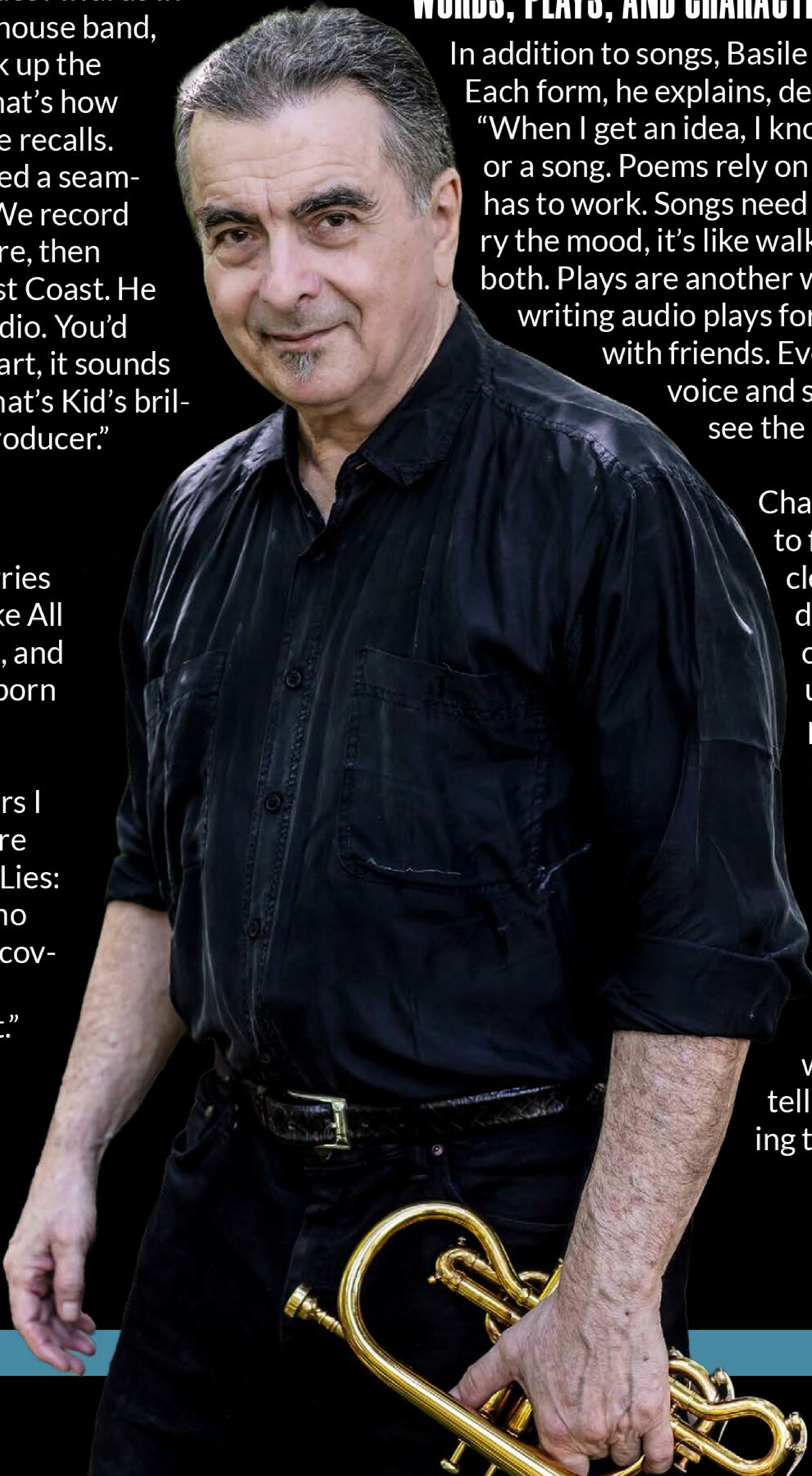
"You can tell a lie, but you can't sing a lie," I suggested. Basile nods to his roots in musical theatre. "Actors lie for a living. The singers I loved early on, Sinatra, Fred Astaire, were really singing actors. Later I discovered soul singers like Sam Cooke and Ray Charles, where it was more personal. I'm comfortable with both, but I'd never pretend to sing a pain I never experienced. Once you've lived it, you've bought your license."

That balance between truth and character keeps Basile's catalogue rich and varied. Songs like Thank You, Fool come from character-driven storytelling, while Good Friends is a universal truth anyone can sing. "The personal songs cut deeper on this record because my experiences have cut deeper in recent years," he admits.

WORDS, PLAYS, AND CHARACTERS

In addition to songs, Basile is a poet and playwright. Each form, he explains, demands its own discipline. "When I get an idea, I know right away if it's a poem or a song. Poems rely on words alone; every syllable has to work. Songs need melody and rhythm to carry the mood, it's like walking on two legs, you need both. Plays are another world entirely. I've been writing audio plays for six years, acting in them with friends. Everything depends on the voice and soundscape since you don't see the actors."

Character songs allow him to flex those dramatic muscles. He recalls one from his debut album inspired by a childhood memory: "My uncle used to pin me down playfully, and when I'd complain he'd say, 'Why are you crying? It doesn't hurt me at all.' Years later, I wrote a song with that title, but I reimagined it as a man mistreating a woman. The situation was different, but the emotional truth was real. As any actor will tell you, sometimes it's liberating to play the villain."



THE BLUES AS A LIFELINE

For Al Basile, songwriting isn't just craft, it's survival. Life's struggles, disappointments, and hard lessons become fuel for art. "Over the past few years, I've been through some difficult experiences," he says. "The blues is how I get them off my chest. But at the same time, it gives me joy to shape them into songs others can relate to. Whether it's pain, humour, or pure groove, that's the essence of the blues."

ON STAGE AND BEYOND

Being on stage isn't about slipping into a character, it's about amplification.

"I like being on stage and so, in that sense, I'm always up. But there are different ways of being up. When I'm giving a poetry reading, I'm not jumping around. When I'm on-stage playing music, I move. I don't pretend the audience can't see me; I want to present something for them."

That desire to connect with people has long defined Basile's work, whether as a cornet player, singer, songwriter, or poet. He ties this philosophy back to one of his greatest influences: Louis Armstrong.

"To me, there's no deeper art than Armstrong. He fooled you into thinking he was just having fun, but that's profound artistry," Basile explains.

LOOKING BACK

Reflecting on his career, Basile thinks about his eight-year-old self, trumpet in hand. "The only thing I'd change is I'd tell my teacher, who was a great jazz trumpeter, to talk about improvising. He never did. I had to dismantle barriers that came from only learning how to read music. If I'd known earlier about making up my own thing, I could've started sooner." There's a smile in his voice as he recalls a moment of closure. "Fifty years after he taught me, I got to play with him. He was 95, I was standing next to him, and we were both playing Duke Ellington. That was special. Our styles were completely compatible, even though he never talked to me about jazz. He was so tickled to see it."

SUCCESS, CONNECTION, AND SONGWRITING

For Basile, success has never been about charts or trophies. "I make a distinction between self-expression and communication," he explains. "Self-expression is writing a poem, even if nobody reads it. Communication is when someone hears it, and it connects.

"I had a woman come up after a poetry reading, asking if she could read one of my poems at her wife's funeral. What better response could you possibly get? She said I had said it better than she could have. Those are the most satisfying moments."

When it comes to his songs, the stories run deep. He cites Older by the Minute as an example, born from a chance encounter with a former partner. "She might have been interested in starting something again, but I'd moved on. That's where that song comes from. I usually don't tell people when they've inspired songs, unless it's flattering," he laughs.

A NEW SOUND

Basile's latest album reflects both growth and risk. "We used different mixing and mastering equipment, up-to-date technologies. We spent a lot of time on it, and I believe it has a sound distinct from all my other records. Recording brass isn't easy, it can sound metallic or harsh. But we got the sound I make live in a room, and I'm proud of that." His hope? That listeners notice both the sonic shift and the lyrical depth. "I feel like I'm singing with a different conviction on this one. But even if they don't notice, I'm happy with it."

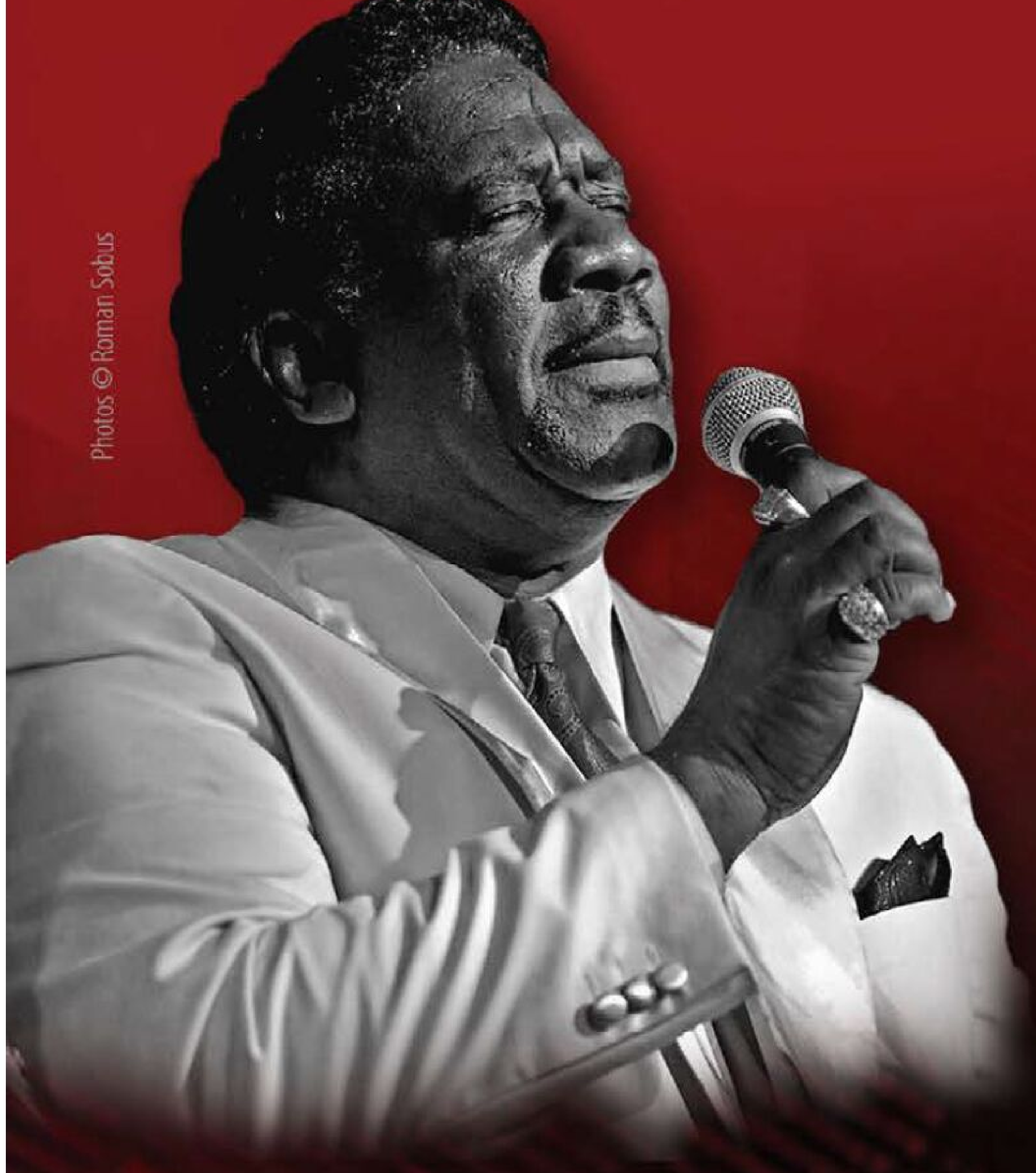
Though he doesn't tour, he's optimistic about reaching listeners through radio and streaming. "I work hard to create something that you can enjoy whether it's playing in the next room while you're making dinner, or if you're sitting down listening closely. The closer you listen, the more you discover."

THE ARMSTRONG PRINCIPLE

"Armstrong never said, 'This solo requires a lifetime of study.' He just played. You can dig it for what it is, but if you look deeper, you see the artistry. That's what I'm trying to do: create something that sounds natural and enjoyable but carries depth for those who want to find it. Armstrong radiated joy despite what he went through. That stuck with me, I want audiences to feel that joy too."
For further information see website: https://albasile.com/

EXPLORE

MUD MORGANFIELD
DEEP MUD


Photos © Roman Sobus

Mud Morganfield, the eldest son of Muddy Waters, is deeply committed to continuing the great tradition of Chicago Blues in this hard-hitting set of 12 originals and two Chess-era Muddy revivals.

Recorded at JoyRide Studio with some of Chicago's heaviest hitters the way his father proudly did it during the genre's hallowed heyday, *DEEP MUD* is the sixth studio album from this award-winning blues legend.

DEEP MUD
MUD MORGANFIELD
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"His ability to peel back the years and make us feel as if we're in the godlike presence of one of the 20th century's most revered musical geniuses is beyond dispute; in fact, it's become both his identity and his calling card." - David Whiteis, Living Blues

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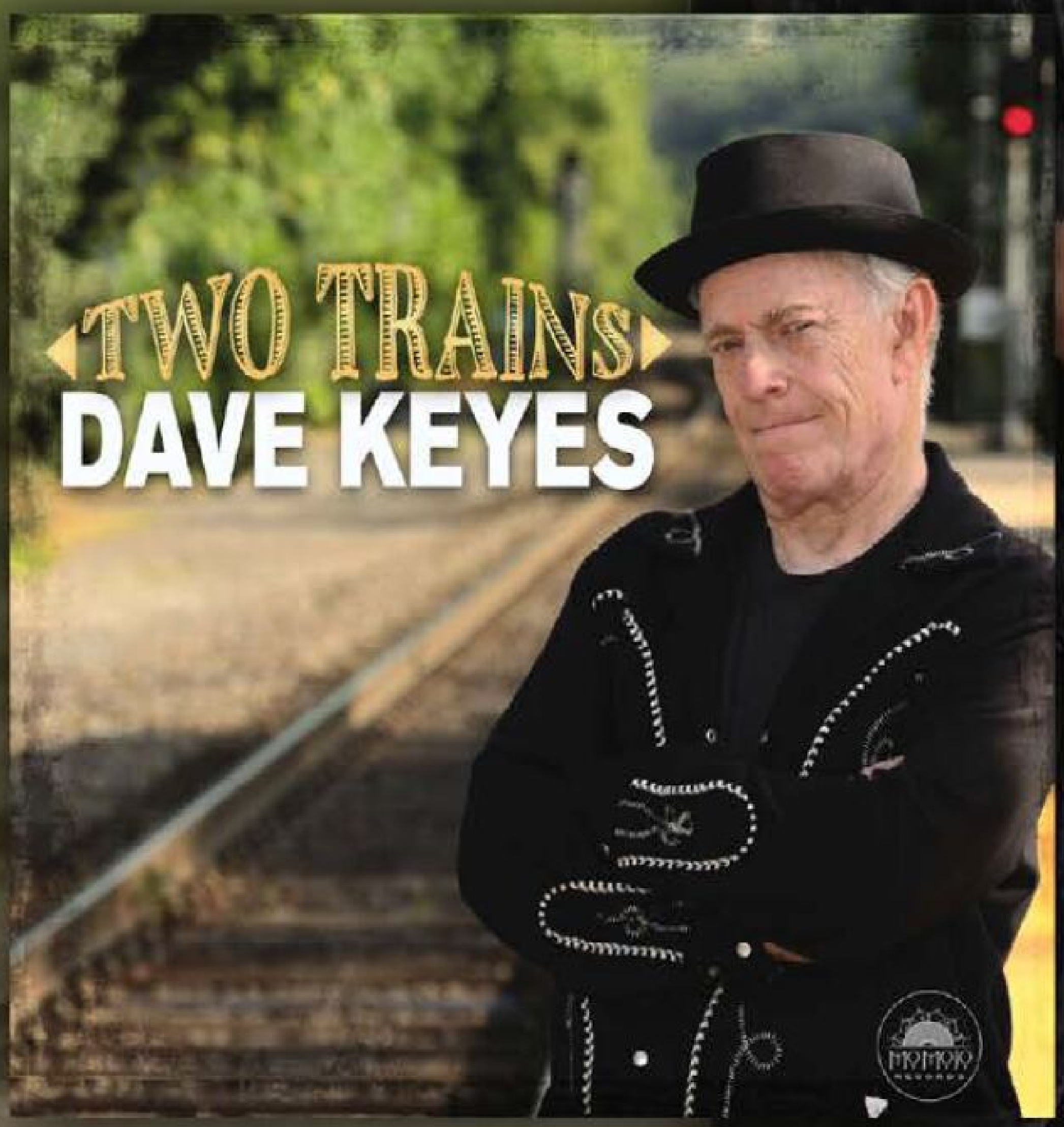
Native New Yorker, keyboardist, singer, and songwriter Dave Keyes is a 40-year veteran of the Blues and American Roots music scenes. His latest album, *Two Trains*, features legendary drummer Bernard Purdie, plus a stellar supporting cast of New York's best musicians and singers. Having toured the world both as a solo artist and with his own band, Dave Keyes mines his blues, boogie, country, rock and roll and gospel roots on *Two Trains*, with 10 original tunes and his always tasty and electrifying keyboard work.



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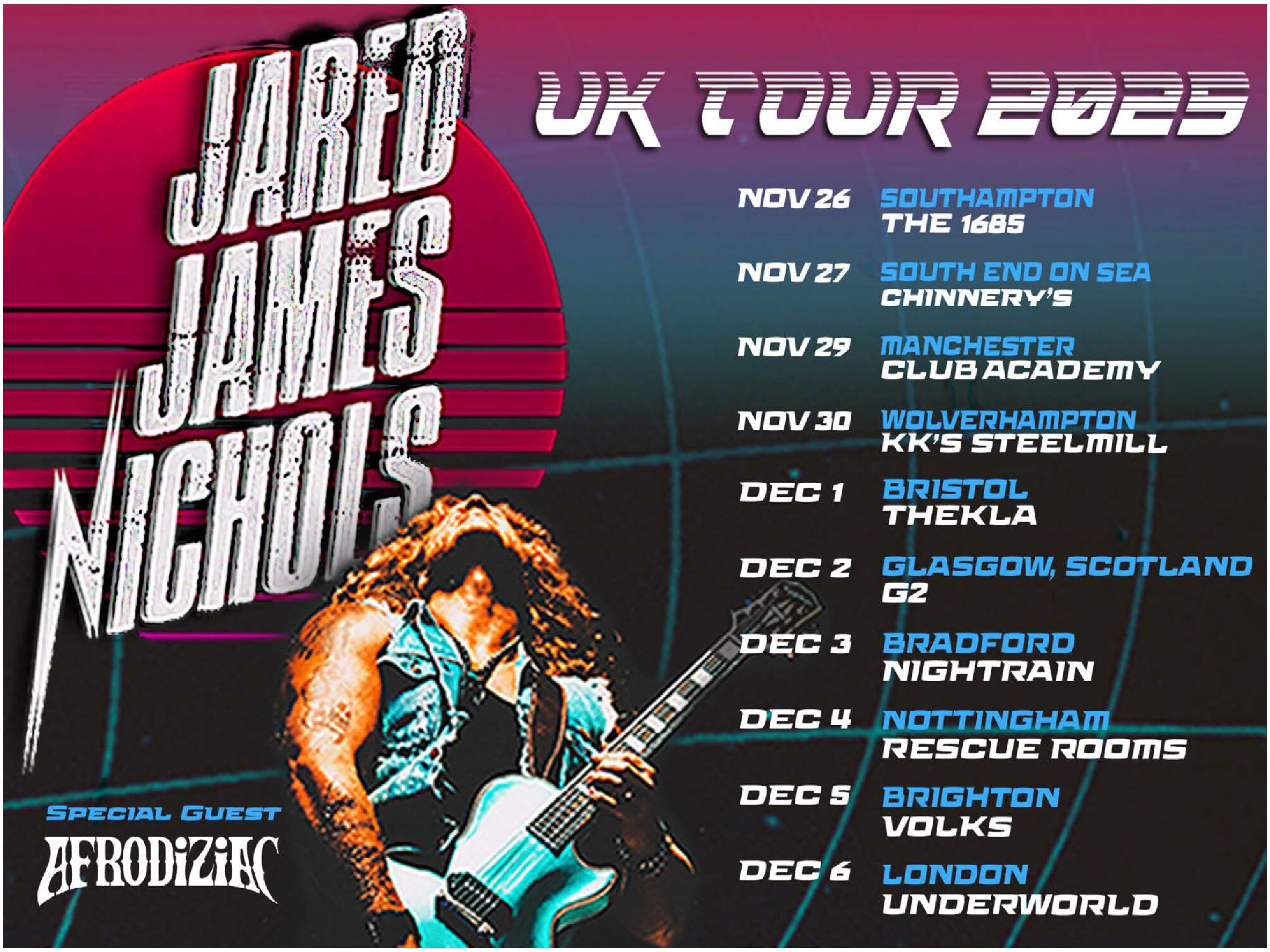

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DEC 4 NOTTINGHAM
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DEC 5 BRIGHTON
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DEC 6 LONDON
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SPECIAL GUEST
AFRODIZIAC

EVERYTHING THA

For a band that came together later in life, Scotland's Bison Hip has managed to carve out an impressive reputation on the blues scene in just a few short years. With two EPs, three albums, and a loyal following, their blend of blues, rock, and soul feels both seasoned and refreshingly alive.

Colin Campbell Supplied

Blues Matters caught up with songwriter and guitarist **John Gilmour Smith** to talk about his musical journey, the challenges of social media, the creative spirit behind their latest record, and what the future holds for the band.

Blues has always been about stories; where you've been, what you've seen, and where you're heading. For Glasgow-based outfit Bison Hip, the journey began not in a smoky barroom, but on a Zoom call during lockdown.

THE BIRTH OF BISON HIP

Blues has always been about stories; where you've been, what you've seen, and where you're heading. For Glasgow-based outfit Bison Hip, the journey began not in a smoky barroom, but on a Zoom call during lockdown. "Most of us have known each other for decades," Smith recalls with a laugh. "Paul and I go back to when we were 17. We've all played in different bands and kept in touch. During lockdown in 2020, after a few whiskies, Paul said, 'We've got the bones of a band here, why don't we do something?' We all laughed, but by the end of that Zoom call, Bison Hip was born." When the restrictions lifted, the band gathered in person with no clear plan just a hunger to play. "We didn't know where it would lead, but we started recording, and five years later here we are, still going strong."

ROOTS AND INFLUENCES

Smith's love for music began early. "I was about nine when I first heard Tubeway Army's Are Friends Electric? on the radio in my dad's car, and not long after, The Police's Message in a Bottle. That was the moment I thought…how do you get to do that?"

AT CAME BEFORE

From borrowing LPs at the library to discovering Bowie and Miles Davis, his appetite was wide. But it was Stevie Ray Vaughan's fiery guitar on Bowie's Let's Dance that pulled him closer to the blues. "That led me to SRV's records, and from there I never really looked back. Rock and blues became the two styles that stuck with me." Unlike many players, Smith wasn't obsessed with the guitar itself. "For me, instruments were always tools to write songs. I've always been about songwriting first. That's what drives me."

A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO RECORDING

Their latest record Everything That Came Before Was Just Leading Up To This, was cut at Chime Studios in Glasgow, with a process as disciplined as it was stripped-back. "We've got this rule; no more than four rehearsals before recording, no click tracks, and no more than three takes of each song. Most of the album is second takes," Smith explains. "It keeps the energy alive. There's something in that little bit of nervousness that makes the performance real. Everything's live; drums, bass, guitars, keys all recorded quickly to capture that freshness."
Mixing, he admits, is the slow part. "I'm no pro mixer; it takes me ages. But the songs themselves come together fast."

THE SONGWRITING PROCESS

Though Smith wrote all the tracks for this album, the process isn't fixed. "Sometimes it starts with a riff, other times a lyric or even just a title. The title track started as a phrase that stuck in my head. Later a riff came, and suddenly the song wrote itself."

Thematically, the album reflects on time, experience, and perspective. "There's that question of getting older; have the best days passed, or is the best still to come? Personally, I think there's still great stuff ahead, and working with the band feels better than ever. We've got more confidence now, more gigs and albums behind us. That comfort shows in the songs."

STORIES BEHIND THE SONGS

Several tracks dig into universal experiences:
Bedlam speaks of seeking peace. "At this stage, I don't want conflict, I want to come home and shut the door on the chaos outside."

Chemicals their catchy new single, takes a tongue-in-cheek look at love. "Is it real emotion, or just dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin tricking us? We joked about it, but it stuck."

LISTEN
TO THIS INTERVIEW
YOUTUBE

Why Should I Cry If You Leave Me is an introspective take on failed relationships. "Am I soft-hearted, hard-hearted? It's me asking myself those questions."
Outrageous captures the energy of larger-than-life characters. "It's about someone wild, unpredictable, someone you might not want in your life, but also don't want to lose."

It's Cool turns a critical eye to modern society. "It came from reading about how social media reshapes relationships. As an older guy, I'm trying to reconcile myself with a world that doesn't always sit right."

Mountain draws on the philosophy of Alan Watts. "It's about stopping the urge to force everything in life and instead letting things flow. The lyric, 'this time the mountain will come to me,' is about no longer being a slave to work, relationships, or life's pressures."

The Imposter turns inward, questioning past failures. "It's easy to blame the world for what hasn't gone right. But sometimes you've got to ask, maybe it's me. That's what the song wrestles with, and it's probably one of my most personal lyrics."

And with Defenceless vulnerability takes centre stage. "It's about being willing to risk, to show fragility. Every time you release music, you're opening yourself up to people saying, 'This is great' or 'This is rubbish.' It's about being prepared for that."

Even lighter moments, like the live feel of I Forgot to Tell My Heart You're Gone, reveal the camaraderie within the band. Leaving in snippets of banter from the studio session gave the track an authenticity they felt too good to cut.

BLUES, ROCK, AND LABELS

When asked about genre, Smith reflects thoughtfully. "We've been described as blues rock, which is fair, but I've always thought of blues as more about catharsis and honesty than strict chord structures. We're not from the Delta, we're from Glasgow. If we tried to copy 'authentic' blues, it would be inauthentic. So, we just play honestly, with real instruments, and hope it resonates."
On whether genres even matter anymore, he shrugs. "It's just music. You either like it, or you don't. I listen to everything from Depeche Mode to Bowie to Vaughan. Those influences creep in. The important thing is writing songs we believe in."

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE MODERN BLUES BAND

In today's music landscape, social media has become as important as the songs themselves. For Smith, though, it's a double-edged sword.

"We try to do more of it. Paul does most of it. I'm not a social media guy, I don't do TikTok, I'm barely on Instagram.

I'm on Facebook, but even then, I find it hard. The strange thing is the posts that seem to get the most traction is when it's just us talking. I find that odd because I don't watch videos of other people talking, I'm not interested in that! But for some reason, people want that from us. If someone listens to your music, they'll look you up on Facebook. They want to see what you're up to, almost on a day-to-day basis. If it wasn't for the band, I'd probably not be on it at all. But now it's part of the job."

REACHING AUDIENCES IN A SATURATED MARKET

The next challenge is how to get Bison Hip's music heard beyond their dedicated base. Radio has been a lifeline. "There are still traditional routes with blues radio shows, and the support we've had has been incredible. We were 13th on last year's IBBM airplay chart—that blew us away. But it's a saturated world, and standing out is really tough."

Geography also plays a role. Unlike bands in southern England who can play a dense circuit of clubs and festivals, Bison Hip faces a different reality in Scotland. "It's hard because there isn't the same gigging community up here. To get to the bigger scenes costs us a lot in travel. So, we're often in the position of asking festival organizers to give us a chance, like so many other bands are."

LOOKING AHEAD

"We're not chasing world domination. We all have jobs, families, and commitments. If someone offered us the back-of-a-van world tour, we'd say no. But we love making music together, and as long as we're still mates and enjoying it, we'll keep going. The best thing has been the people we've met, the gigs we've played, and the reception we've had. At the end of each year, we ask ourselves, 'Do we want to keep doing this?' So far, the answer's always been yes."

For Bison Hip, success isn't measured in streams or chart positions. It's measured in connection onstage, on record, and yes, even reluctantly, on social media.

HOPES, FEARS, AND THE BLUES ITSELF

When asked about his hopes for the new record, Smith is pragmatic but heartfelt. "I just want more people to hear it than the last one. I really liked the last album, and I'd love for this one to reach further. As far as fears go, I don't have many. If people don't like it, that's life. You can only make music you believe in. I read once that more people didn't buy Thriller than did, and that was the biggest selling record of all time. You just can't please everyone. So, we've put our time and energy into this, but all you can do is hope it connects."

For Smith, the heart of that connection lies in the blues itself. His definition is clear: "The blues is cathartic. It's about getting stuff out of you that can be poisonous and throwing it into the world. That's what I hear in Muddy Waters' Hard Again, especially Mannish Boy. It sounds like he's got his mates in the room backing him up. That's the blues real, live, communal, cathartic. It's not just about chords or scales, it's about honesty. Buddy Guy had a track not too long ago where he was basically saying, just give me a few more years. That hit me. That's the blues, musically and lyrically. It's raw, it's real, and it stays with you."

FRIENDSHIP OVER FAME

If the blues is catharsis, then camaraderie is what keeps Smith coming back. "The most motivating thing for me is doing this with my mates," he says with a grin. "Some people go to football with their pals, some go to the pub. I play gigs with mine. That's what keeps me going. I'm not chasing international stardom, but when we're on stage and it gets emotional because we've known each other so long it's special. We've travelled, we've had laughs, we've shared all of this together. That's the heart of it for me."

Those shared experiences have also led to some unusual gigs. "The strangest? Probably the first one we ever did, at HMV in Glasgow. We were stuck in the corner of the shop. Pretty odd. Then there was a festival in Peterborough early on. In our heads it was going to be a big rock festival, but it turned out to be more of a family fun day. Cover bands, bungee jumping, and there we were playing to a guy and his dog while everyone else went to watch. But we've been lucky. We've had good support from people like Stephen Stanley early on, which gave us solid gigs right from the start."

AN INVITATION TO LISTEN

At the end of our conversation, Smith has one simple request for blues fans: "Come and give us a listen. If you like it, join our Facebook and follow along. We'd love to meet more people. The community we've found in the blues scene has been amazing, so welcoming. We think we're pretty good live, and we'd love for more folks to come and see for themselves. Come say hi, have a chat, we'd love to meet you."

Bison Hip may not be chasing rock star dreams, but with their heartfelt songwriting, strong camaraderie, and unwavering dedication to the blues, they're carving out something more enduring: a connection that's both deeply personal and universally relatable.

As Smith says, "As long as we're enjoying it and we are, we'll keep going."

EXPLORE

BISON HIP

LIVE DATES

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16th Nov - Glasgow Blues Festival, Oran Mor Glasgow

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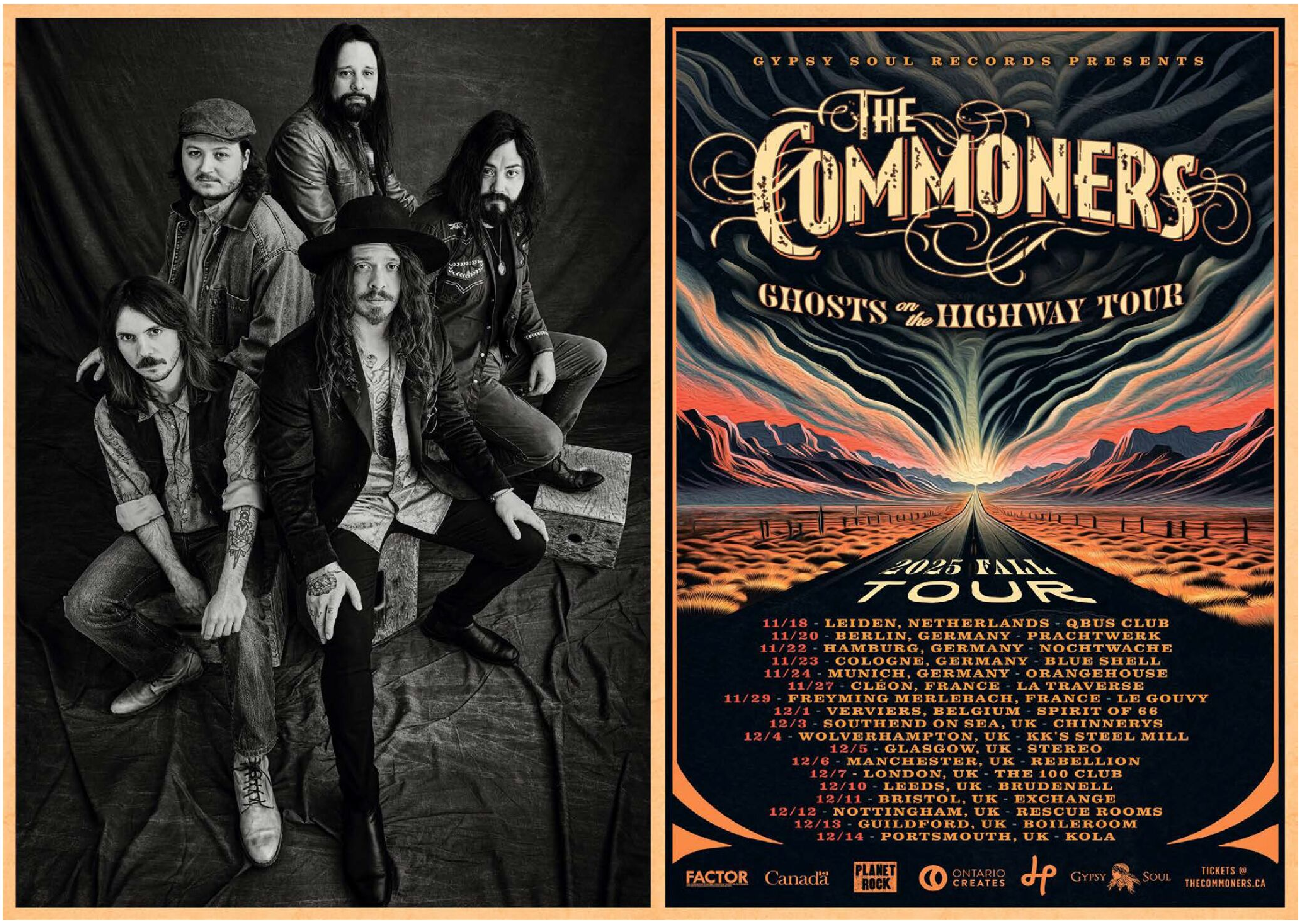

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11/29 - FREYMING MERLEBACH, FRANCE - LE GOUVY
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12/3 - SOUTHEND ON SEA, UK - CHINNERYS
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12/5 - GLASGOW, UK - STEREO
12/6 - MANCHESTER, UK - REBELLION
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12/11 - BRISTOL, UK - EXCHANGE
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JARED JAMES NICHOLS

LIFE ON THE ROAD

Musicians are notorious for their addictive behaviour and there is a special term for those who constantly crave the ecstatic highs provided by live performance and the freedom of the freewheeling travelling lifestyle. They are known as road rats.

Paul Davies Louise Phillips

Having recently announced November/December UK tour dates, Jared James Nichols fits larger than life into this category as his ongoing tour of musical duty currently finds him trailing around the USA as he tells me from his Nashville base:

“I leave here tomorrow for a tour starting in Florida. I’m doing some of my own shows, but also doing a bunch of support slots for Michael Schenker. We’re basically doing the East Coast to the Midwest and by the time it goes down South, that’s when we’re out. Then we prepare for our Europe and UK tour starting at the end of October into November.”

He adds with a glint in his eye as he reveals his passion for gigging in the UK: “I love it there, I really do. I know people probably say that all the time,” he quips, “but it’s one of my favourite places to play on the planet.”
He qualifies this bold statement: “There’s a community of people that still love the music. They love what I love and it’s just fun and it’s amazing to continually go back to the UK and see a lot of the same faces and new people coming every time. The UK is a great place for music,” he enthuses.

FALLING FOR BRITISH BLUES

Jared is a huge fan of the 60s and 70s British blues rock music scene as he passionately reveals:
“I grew up in Wisconsin which is near to the top of America and close to Canada. As a kid, way before I’d ever picked up a guitar, I was hearing Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath and all of those classic rock bands on the radio and from my parents. I loved that music before I thought about being a musician.”

He further reflects: “It really clicked for me when I was listening to the radio and I heard Cream, and I was like this kind of reminds me of Jimi Hendrix. They were doing Crossroads and the tried and true version of it is Cream’s.”

“It really hooked me in. After I got a guitar, I started to want to find that bluesy sound. So, I started with those bands that I’d heard as a kid. I was going for Ritchie Blackmore, Tony Iommi and all of the guitar players that had that sound.”

He continues: “Then I started to dig back and hone in on different players, especially the UK players, everyone from Paul Kossoff to Peter Green to Gary Moore and all the John Mayall stuff. When I got that Beano record with Clapton on it, it just knocked me out. I had no idea what I was hearing. It sounded like it was from another planet and I started idolising the British blues. I just loved the British interpretation of the American blues.”

FIRST STEPS ON STAGE

Reeling in the years, I ask the rarely alliterated Jared James if there was an instance when he knew he was getting to be a pretty hot guitarist:

“It’s really a very funny moment. I’d only been playing guitar for a few months and, although I was not at all good, I could kind of understand what I was doing a little bit and I thought, ‘OK, this kind of makes sense to my brain.’”
He ponders awhile: “I was in my bedroom, picking along, trying to figure out something, and my mom walked in and she said, ‘have you ever heard of a blues jam’? I had no idea what that was. She goes, ‘they have a jam. It’s near Chicago. It’s every Sunday, they do barbecue and blues’. And I was like, I’d love to check it out. And she goes, ‘well, bring your guitar’. And I was like, ‘no way’!”

Finding himself at his own crossroads, he made a fatefully correct decision: “Anyway, we went there and we get out of the car, and I literally hear a slow blues like Jimmy Reed

JARED JAMES NICHOLS

that sounds really good and it's all these old school Chicago musicians. There was a guy in there, Big Jim Johnson, who used to play with Slim Harpo and Little Walter. There were players from Buddy Guy's band, and people that played with Junior Wells. I walked in and I had no idea what was going on. But, my mom signed me up to get on stage. I borrowed a guitar and I barely knew how to go through a 12 bar blues. The only reason I knew about the 12 bar blues was from hearing Bring It On Home by Led Zeppelin."

He pauses momentarily. "It was like I got thrown in the water and there was something inside of me, I don't know if it was being so nervous or stressed, but once that moment was done and I played like this little solo and people clapped for me, I was hooked. It was like nothing I've ever experienced before and I chase that feeling to this day." He adds: "It's a cheesy kind of story, but it goes way back to when I first got on stage and I was like, I want to do this. I want to feel that again and keep doing this," he affirms.

THE NO-PICK TECHNIQUE

Eschewing a guitar pick, his pinprick sharp style sets him apart from most of his contemporaries. He literally nails it with a unique guitar technique especially for an artist who errs on the heavy side of the sonic-sphere as he explains:

"I don't use a pick which comes out of a funny place. So, I'm left handed and when I first picked up a guitar, I picked it up like a lefty would. And I'm at this small music store near my hometown, and the guy in there goes, 'hey, man, you got to flip the guitar'. So, I'm playing it like a righty. Anyway, he showed me how to put my fingers into a chord shape, but I was using my thumb to strum."

He continues: "When my parents got me my first electric guitar, it came with a guitar lesson, and when I went in there I was strumming with my thumb, and the teacher goes, 'you gotta use a guitar pick'. I tried to use a guitar pick, but there's something about feeling the strings under your fingers. I was feeling that with my thumb, but I started to try with a pick. But then someone says,

‘have you ever heard of Jeff Beck’? And then Albert King or Albert Collins? I didn’t know any of these people, but I started to hear their style, and I thought if these guys can play without a guitar pick, maybe I should just try. I wasn’t thinking I was going to be a professional guitar player. Then people started to associate me as the ‘no pick guy’. So, it became a thing without me trying to make it a thing.”

I enquire whether his style inspired by these blues greats limits the palette of guitar sounds he can achieve: “Well, in certain styles it would be limiting, for sure, especially if I were to try and play something that’s like a heavier style,” he declares. “I have friends that play very heavy music that require a lot of fast picking and crazy tempos. And there are certain things that I can’t really get out of my fingers that would do that. But, on the flip side, it is so nuance heavy that I knew I was hooked on it when I first started to play the blues.”

He describes: “It’s the way that you pick the string, the pressure where you’re picking on it, and how hard and all of that. It’s almost like you are talking through the guitar. It’s super nuanced. The really cool part about it is that you can sound like yourself on any guitar, because there’s nothing in between you and the strings. I’ll write something, or I’ll hear something in my head, and I’ll ask myself how would I do that on the guitar? Because I have to think about it without a pick and, 99.9% of the time, I’m able to kind of come up with something similar or a little different than what I was going for. It makes me kind of make up a lot of my own techniques, almost on the spot, which is pretty good fun.”

OLD GLORY AND GIBSON RECOGNITION

Jared’s standout playing style got him noticed by Gibson guitars. Remarkably, he has his own Gibson Signature Guitar as he proudly shows and tells me: “Let me grab it. It’s right here. Hold on... So, check this out. This is the first one. This is the prototype. We’ve done three different versions of this guitar so far and it’s called ‘Old Glory’.”

He proudly states as he holds it towards me like a toy between his huge arms on his zoom camera. “It’s all black, as you can see. But the one thing about this guitar for me, I never really got along with a neck pickup at the time, because I was picking right there and it would always get in my way.”

A little bit of home tech sorted this: “I was messing around with a Les Paul, and I started to take this pickup out of my guitars and really focus on this single back pickup that’s kind of reminiscent of Leslie West from Mountain.”

He says: “I modulated my guitars with only one volume and one tone knob and the oldest style wraparound bridge so it’s like an old school guitar. I did this on my own, not thinking anything of it, almost like the picking, and people started to ask me, ‘what’s this guitar you’re playing’?”

One particularly well known musician asked Jared this same question as he tells the tale: “I was on tour with Lynyrd Skynyrd and Ricky Medlocke said to me, ‘hey, man, I want to buy that guitar’. And I was like, ‘it’s my only guitar. I can’t sell it’. So, he went to Gibson, and asked them to build him one. All of a sudden Gibson thought who’s the kid with this guitar? They had multiple requests to make it and by the end of 2018 they said that they wanted to make me a Signature Guitar. This thing was completely from the ground up. It’s exciting and I’m obviously super grateful to have it!”

LOOKING AHEAD

With three highly respected albums and a slew of EPs to his name, the earlier mention of an upcoming UK tour leads me to wonder whether there’s any new music on its way: “Yeah! Over the course of the past year, I’ve been writing as well as starting to record and do different things and kind of test some stuff out. We’re going to announce a single in October. Then we’re going to have some music that’s going to kick off right alongside it when we’ll be in Europe about two weeks before I head to the UK, which is like middle of November, and we will announce the full details of a new record for early next year.”

He raves: “I’m so excited about it. I just finished it and I’m really, really happy because I was able to dig into the songwriting more and I feel like I was able to breathe a little bit more. It’s not just straight in your face. There’s a lot of really cool shades of different stuff, which I’m also very excited about.”

Talking of which, he admits that the fortunate ticket holders will hear some of the new tunes on the UK tour: “By the time I get to the UK, we’ll be playing the two singles that will be out as well as maybe one or two other ones for a special surprise. Every single show is going to be exciting.”

His name alone guarantees a storming show and it’s always a hot ticket when Jared James Nichols blows into town but catch him quickly before he breezes on down the road on a rat run of fiery shows.

Jared James Nichols and special guest AfroDiziac tour the UK from November 26 to December 6. Tickets available from www.jaredjamesnichols.com

EXPLORE

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"THAT CONNECTION ON STAGE IS EVERYTHING"

KEYS TO THE BLUES

An interview with Dave Keyes

Here at Blues Matters, we caught up with the ever-busy pianist, singer, and songwriter Dave Keyes, who's been setting stages alight for decades with his soulful playing and storytelling songs. Speaking from his home just outside New York City, Dave shared his excitement about a brand-new record called Two Trains, his deep connection with the piano, and the many legends he's encountered along the way.

Colin Campbell Supplied

Life is Good

"I'm really excited about this new record I have coming out," Dave tells me with a smile you can hear down the line. "We've got a bunch of gigs surrounding that and there's a lot of good energy. I just got back from the Big Blues Bender in Las Vegas, which is a wonderful festival, it's wall-to-wall music for four days. You hardly even step outside the hotel!"

At the Bender, Dave took part in a special piano tribute alongside Victor Wainwright and Jimmy Carpenter. "We created an arc starting from the 1920s blues and Bessie Smith, through boogie-woogie and swing, and into the rock 'n' roll era, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, cats like that. It was amazing to highlight the importance of the piano in the blues story."

Discovering Music Early

Like many great musicians, Dave's journey began at home. "My mom was into musical theatre, and she encouraged me to take piano lessons. I started with classical, but after a month I told her I wasn't enjoying it. She asked what I wanted to learn, and I said, 'Songs I hear on the radio.' The first one was Down Town by Petula Clark." From there, his teachers encouraged him to explore chords, improvisation, and eventually jazz standards. "In seventh grade I had a teacher who gave me 20 tunes to learn, stuff like Satin Doll. He told me if I learned them, I'd always be able to work as a pianist. He was right."

From Solo to Big Band

Keyes' career has been wonderfully varied. He's equally at home fronting his own five-piece band, hammering out solo boogie-woogie sets, or playing duos with legendary drummers like Bernard Purdie. "I just like good music, man," he says. "I love being part of a big ensemble, but I can also walk into a room, sit down at the piano, and get people dancing all by myself. That's what I really love about the piano, it's a percussive instrument, and you can carry the whole room with it."

On stage, confidence comes from years of experience. "You just do it," he laughs. "I was working five or six nights a week from the late '70s onward, touring, Broadway shows, club gigs. You get better by doing it, that's the school of hard knocks."

Roots in the Blues

The blues was always close at hand. "When I was growing up, I heard some of the first wave of blues records that influenced the British bands; Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf. Then one day I bought the Allman Brothers' Live at the Fillmore East and a Jefferson Airplane album. I started reading the credits like they were the Holy Grail, seeing names like McKinley Morganfield, and I'd go look them up. That's how I dug deeper. Music is like a tree, and the blues is the roots. Jazz, Latin, Rock, it all branches out from there. It's music of the heart and the soul."

Influences and Style

"Ray Charles, Leon Russell, and Elton John were huge for me. Ray's soul, Leon's gospel and grit, Elton's piano mastery. Leon especially shaped me with his octave style; it helped me cut through those loud guitars in high school bands! Add Jerry Lee Lewis and Professor Longhair to the mix, and you've got my foundation."

Stories from the Road

Every musician has road stories, and Dave's got some gems. At 19, he found himself backing Chuck Berry. "We hadn't rehearsed, and five minutes before showtime, Chuck finally arrives. My friend knocks on the dressing room door, and Chuck yells back, 'What if I was in here making love to a woman?' though he said it a bit more colourfully! Then he just told us, 'Watch my foot, when it comes down, the song's over.' That was it. And it worked!"

He also spent years with Popa Chubby. “We’ve been friends since the early ’90s. He’s a self-made man, hugely popular in Europe. We’d play to massive crowds in Germany and France, and I often opened solo before joining him on stage. Popa is passionate, volatile, and loving. He rehearsed and recorded in tiny rooms at full blast, Spinal Tap volume! That intensity made for some of the best shows I ever played.”

The Boogie Spirit

“Boogie-woogie has always been in my blood,” he says. “It’s part of the roots of rock ’n’ roll. I love how big an imprint you can make with just a piano and a voice.”
As he looks ahead to his new release and more shows, one thing’s clear: Dave Keyes is keeping the blues flame burning strong, with plenty of soul, swing, and stories left to tell.

For over four decades, pianist, singer, and songwriter Dave Keyes has been a vital part of the American blues and roots scene. Whether working alongside legends like Odetta and Popa Chubby or stepping forward with his own powerhouse recordings, Keyes has built a career on grit, versatility, and an unshakable love of music. With the release of his eighth album, Two Trains, he reflects on lessons learned, life’s dualities, and the healing power of the blues.

The Best Advice

When asked about the best piece of advice he’s ever received, Keyes pauses, then smiles. “I don’t know if I got it from one person or just picked it up along the way,” he says. “But it’s basically this: never say no. Somebody asks you, ‘Hey, can you play this kind of music?’ my answer was always, ‘Sure, let’s do it.’ That openness has brought me opportunities I never would’ve had otherwise. You’ve got to be ready when the moment comes. I’m not the flashiest player in the room, there are plenty who can outplay me technically, but I work hard, I show up prepared, and I try to connect. That connection is everything. Even the toughest character, if you make it click on stage, they’re gonna dig it.”

It’s an ethos that has carried him through collaborations with a remarkable list of artists. “I worked with Odetta for a long time, and she wasn’t always easy. But you do the gig, you respect the music, and people appreciate that. That’s how you last in this business.”

Two Trains – An Album of Dualities

Keyes’ new album Two Trains emerged from a deeply personal chapter in his life. “The title comes from this idea of duality, there’s good and bad in everything, sometimes even in the worst times, there’s light. My wife passed away after 37 years of marriage, and that kind of loss changes everything. But even through grief, you find ways to celebrate life. That’s what this record is about, two trains running down the same track, sometimes crashing, sometimes finding harmony.” The record reflects this range: from joyful boogie-woogie romps like Boogie Til The Cows Come Home to soul-stirring gospel on I’m Alright, co-written with Benny Turner and Mark Sameth. “That song says no matter what you go through, at the end of the day, you’re alright. That’s become one of my favourites.” There’s country-flavoured intimacy in A Long Way from Right, Right Now, featuring harmonica ace Rob Paparozzi, and raw social commentary in What Just Happened, inspired by troubling headlines. “It’s me looking around and asking, ‘How did we get here?’ But I also balance it with songs about faith and love. I still believe goodness wins out.”

Writing and Collaboration

Songwriting for Two Trains was a collaborative journey with lyricist Mark Sameth. “It’s loose,” Keyes says. “Sometimes he’ll hand me words, and I’ll build a whole song around them. Other times we sit down together and tinker. It’s a bit like Elton John and Bernie Taupin’s partnership. These songs came together over six months, and it was a joy. I really think the writing is stronger than anything I’ve done before.”

That strength shines in tracks like Blues Ain’t Looking for You. “It’s about people who are so cold-hearted that even the blues won’t go near them,” Keyes chuckles. “Because the blues live where there’s compassion and soul.”

One of the record’s standout moments is Boogie for Patty, dedicated to his late wife. “She would’ve loved it,” Keyes says softly. “It’s a live, raw track bumps and bruises included, but it captures the joy she brought to everything. That one’s for her.”

Another emotional highlight is, Worrying You Off My Mind recorded with guitarist Woody Mann before his passing. “Woody was such a special guy, a teacher, historian, and a beautiful player. We just set up some microphones in my room one afternoon and played. That track means the world to me.”

For Keyes, Two Trains is not just another album, it’s a culmination of his musical and personal journey.
“I’ve always loved blending styles, blues, rock, gospel, country, funk. That’s why Leon Russell was a hero of mine. He took all these influences and made them his

own. This record does that for me. It pulls everything together. Life throws you curveballs. You can get pulled off track, or you can ask, 'Alright, how am I gonna deal with this?' For me, the answer is always the music. When all else fails, let me boogie."

Road Testing the New Songs

"A bunch of these songs were just finished over the last two or three months. I was so absorbed in making the record, and then I was touring, so I didn't really get to play them live beforehand. But over the next month or so, I've got a bunch of gigs lined up where we'll bring the new songs to the stage. I'm really looking forward to it. We're doing the release party at a club called The Turning Point, about an hour northwest of New York City. It's been around for over 40 years. I used to play there every New Year's Eve with Popa Chubby for two decades since we both live close by. It's a fantastic venue with a great vibe. We put one show up, sold it out, and added an afternoon show. That's really exciting, and I've got a handful of other gigs as well. It's going to be a fun time."

On Returning to play in the UK

"I'd love to, nothing is on the books yet, but I've got a buddy over there, Steve Williams, a guitarist who ran the Willowman Festival up in Northallerton. I've played his festival before, and I'd definitely come over for something like that. The last couple of years have been turbulent for me, but I'm hoping this record gives me a push to get back to more touring. I love playing in the UK; the people, the vibe, everything. I've toured there with Ronnie Spector, playing Manchester, Liverpool, Scotland, even up to Inverness. It's always been a wonderful experience.

A Message for the Fans

"Keep supporting the music. We count on you to come out to the gigs and support your blues societies and clubs, without that, we've got nothing. Playing music at home to yourself just doesn't cut it; it's about sharing the love and sharing the music. So please, keep coming out and bring younger friends along too. There are so many talented young players coming up now, and the more people we expose to this music, the stronger it will be.

I also want to give a shout-out to Blues Matters, being a magazine in this era is a thankless task, but you're giving artists like me an outlet to be heard. I'm grateful for what you and the team are doing. Let's just keep supporting each other and keep the blues alive.

EXPLORE

The Illustrated Blues Of Brian Kramer

BONNIE & JOHNNY

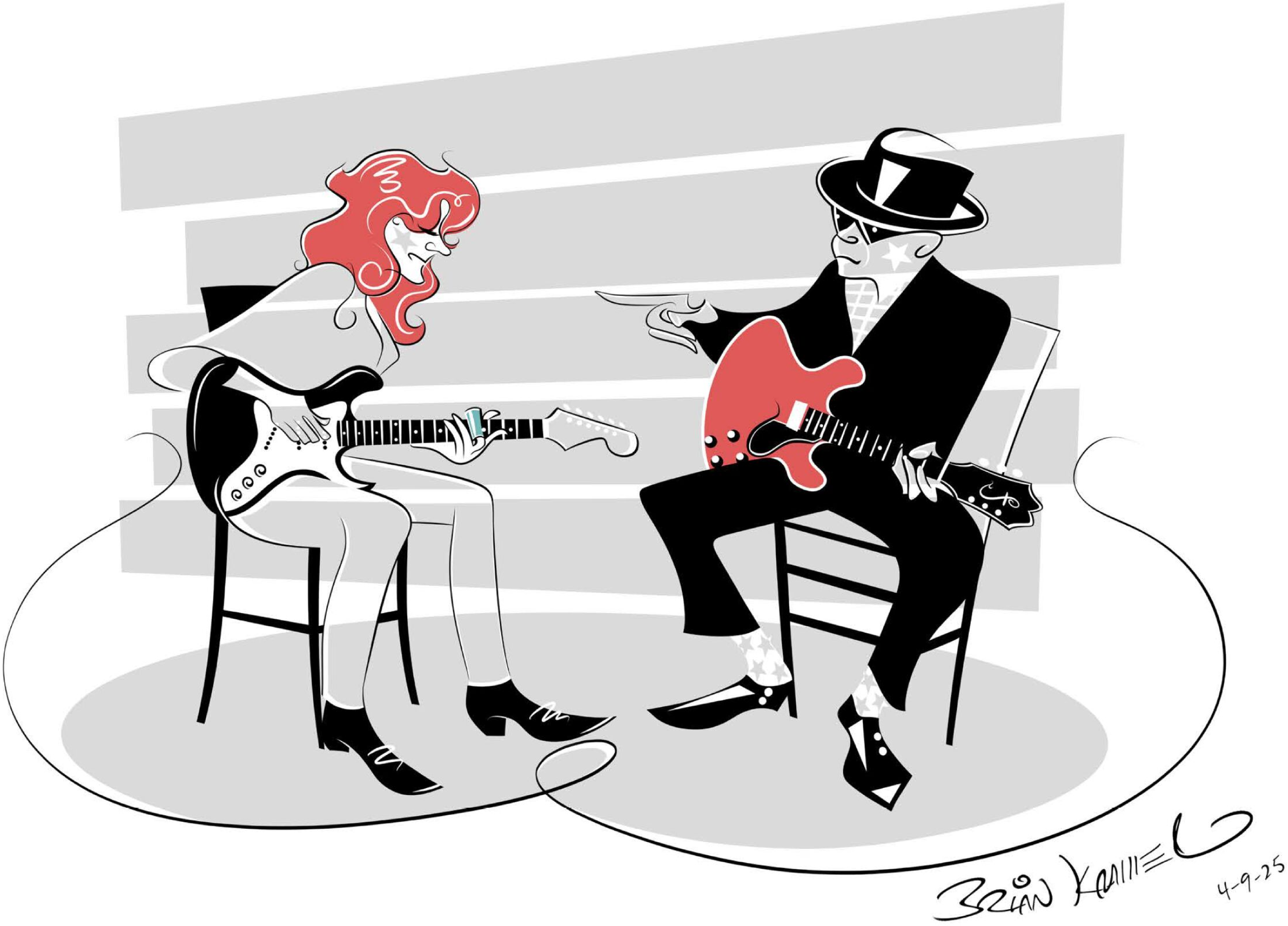
Bonnie Raitt needs very little fanning of flames to discuss her legend, influence, skills.

She's simply a Blues goddess of it all and that goes without saying that she absorbed copious amounts of Blues music directly at the feet of her idols.

As a young woman befriending and opening shows for the likes of Mississippi Fred McDowell, Sippie, Wallace, Son House, Muddy Waters, and of course John Lee Hooker, all mentors to Bonnie.

Bonnie & Johnny Lee recorded together and made a sweet video with them both trading off in Hookers's tune; I'm In The Mood.

This illustration is my tribute to their connection, bond, and Bonnie's love and desire to always support and spread the Blues by people who gave her wings to lift off and fly.



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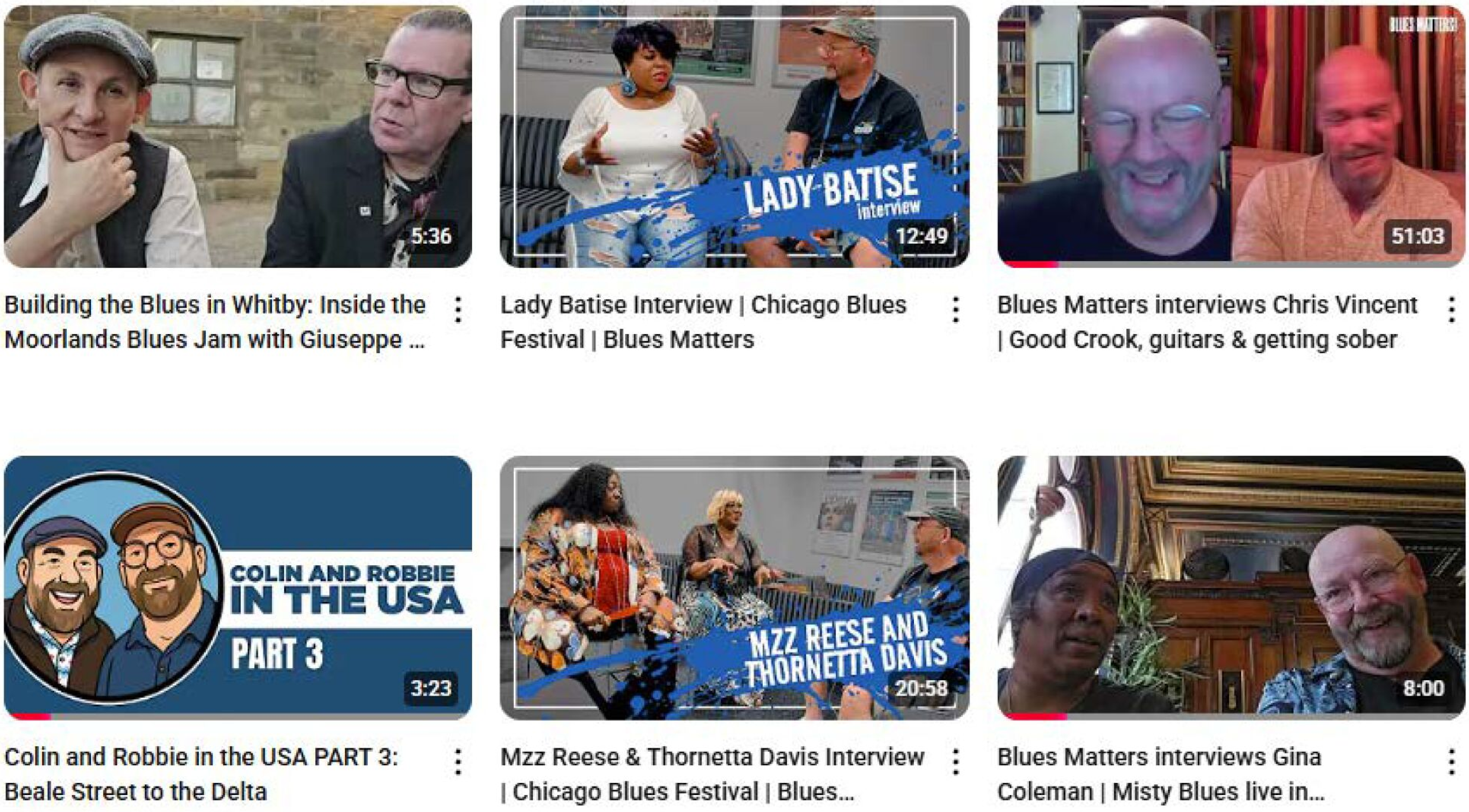

5:36
LADY BATISE
interview
12:49
BLUES MATTERS!
51:03
COLIN AND ROBBIE
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PART 3
3:23
MZZ REESE AND
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BLUES IN A NEW YORK STATE OF MIND

ROCK ICON GEORGE THOROGOOD: REBEL WITH A CAUSE

Abbe Sparks Arnie Goodman

It's been over 50 years since George Thorogood burst onto the scene with his kick-ass band The Destroyers. One thing is perfectly clear – the message remains the same: stay loud, stay proud, and stay bad to the bone. After 8,000 performances and over 15 million albums sold, Thorogood and his longtime bandmates still tear up stages across the globe with grit, gumption, and groove.

The latest run, The Baddest Tour on Earth, may be winding down, but there's no sign of George slowing. I caught up with him while he was finishing the August/September leg, which saw him and The Destroyers hit venues in New York City, Atlantic City, New Jersey, Staten Island, and Connecticut. During our conversation, the rocker I grew up with had me laughing out loud. Thorogood takes great pleasure in making his fans feel like teenagers again, and that still holds true today. Youthful, electric, humble, hardworking, genuine, and passionate – George Thorogood is still, without question, bad to the bone.

New York grooves

Thorogood's relationship with New York audiences stretches back decades.

"I always thought New Yorkers were some of the friendliest people I've ever had the pleasure of hanging around with," he tells me. "People gave NYC a bad rap, thought the audiences were hard to move or stuck up. That's not true. It's just hard to live there – traffic, heat, the pavement. You've got to really love it."

Having grown up in Delaware, Thorogood feels a special connection when returning to the Northeast: "These people have been fighting the elements since 8 am. I don't expect them to jump up and do an Irish jig on every song. I've always been flattered by the response we get. You have to be tough to live in a big city – and NYC is the biggest one."

His first appearances came in the late 70s at The Bottom Line and The Bitter End, later moving up to larger stages like Jones Beach. More recently, the band played Staten Island's

Destroyers

Destroyers

historic St. George Theatre. Thorogood laughs: “Whether it’s a theatre or a showcase club – before the night is over, Thorogood and the Destroyers will turn it into a bar.”

Starting from scratch

Thorogood reflects on the early days with childhood friend and drummer Jeff Simon.

“We hung out all the time, talking about music. I said if we could find one more social outcast, we could start a band. That’s basically how it happened. We started from scratch, with nothing.”

That meant taking whatever gigs they could get. “We had to put the grind on and say, how bad do we want this? From early bar shows we moved into showcase rooms like The Bitter End, and then the venues kept getting bigger once the albums came.”

Some gigs were less than glamorous. “We played a party for 13-year-olds, got $100, a submarine sandwich, and a Coke – and the check bounced. Another time, we played at a school for the deaf. We even played Delaware’s first topless club. The Beatles played behind a stripper, so why not?”

He grins: “I’d say to myself, George, you can’t get stuffy about this. You’ve got to plough through, believe in your music, and someday you won’t have to play in the parking lot of a bowling alley – which we did.”

Bar band spirit

Keeping the same energy after 50 years is no small feat. Thorogood credits his bandmates, including Jeff Simon and longtime Destroyer Jim Suhler. “I respect them,” he says with a chuckle, leaving the rest unsaid.

Touring life has certainly improved. “We started out in a van. Now it’s three tour buses. The travel’s better, the hotels accept us now, and the venues are better. There’s no comparison.”

Despite the bigger stages, Thorogood still identifies as a bar band. “That’s who we are. No matter where we play, we bring that barroom energy with us.”

Heroes and bucket lists

Over the decades, Thorogood has shared stages with Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, B.B. King, John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed, and Buddy Guy. But there’s still one name at the top of his wish list:

“I’m holding out for Sir Paul. If I could just meet him, I’d shake his hand and say two words – thank you.”

He recalls his highest moments: “Playing with the J. Geils Band and The Rolling Stones – that’s as high as you can go. To open for the Stones in front of 100,000 people, then hang backstage with Peter Wolf – it was incredible. Stevie ‘Guitar’ Miller also gave them a run for their money. He treated me like a little brother.”

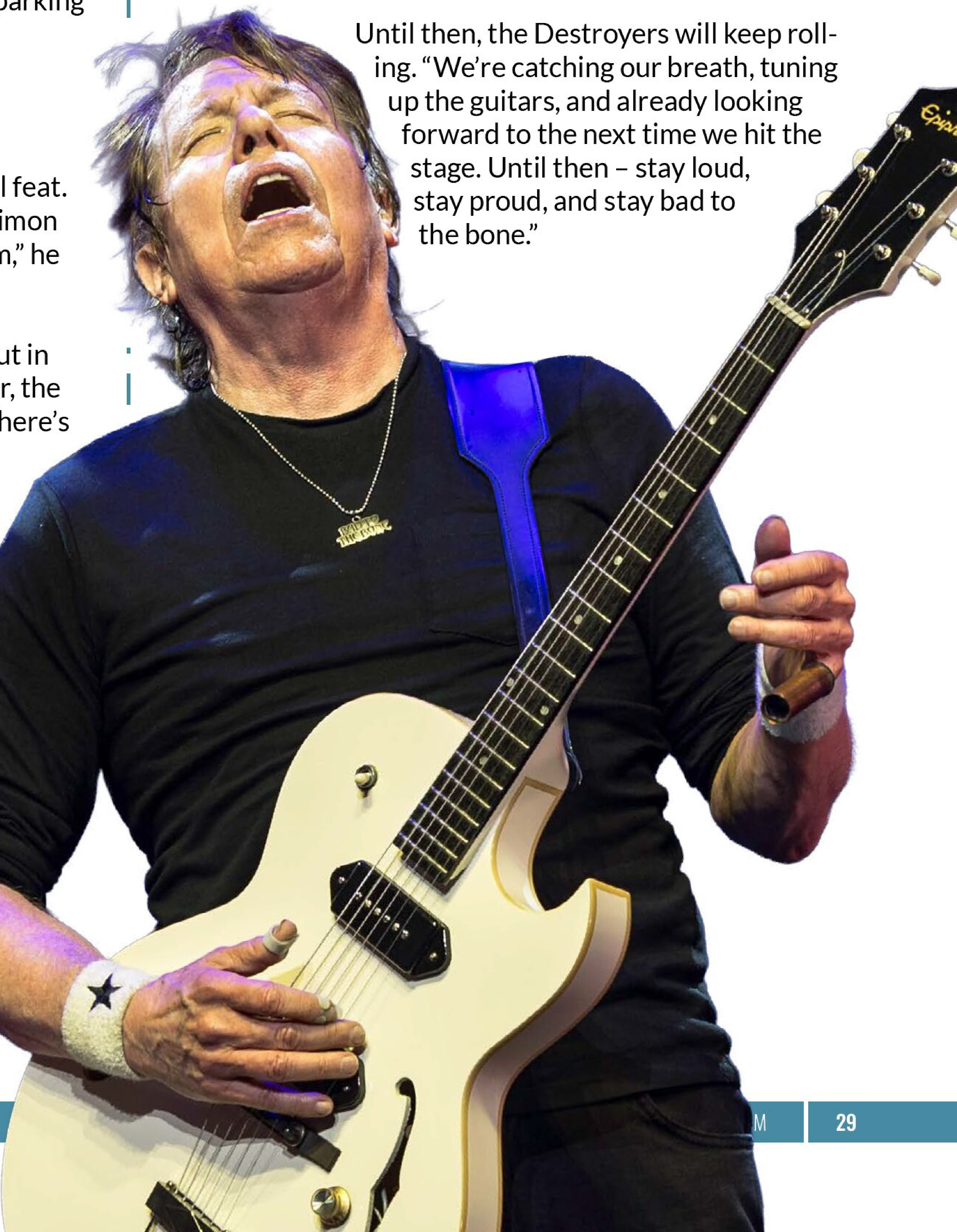
Thorogood also credits his parents for pushing him towards music. “My dad said, you act like a rock star, you dress like a rock star – when are you going to go out and be one? Fear was my motivator. I didn’t want to fail, because I had nothing to fall back on.”

Bad to the bone and beyond

Thorogood’s first guitar was a Supro electric, gifted at Christmas when he was 14. “It was the greatest present ever – along with an amp and The Beatles’ Rubber Soul album.”

As for what’s next after The Baddest Tour on Earth? Thorogood jokes: “First off, I want to express my condolences to Robert Redford’s family and friends. There will never be another like him. On that note – what’s next? Thorogood is ready for Hollywood. I’m waiting for Scorsese to call. I ain’t cheap, but I can be had.”

Until then, the Destroyers will keep rolling. “We’re catching our breath, tuning up the guitars, and already looking forward to the next time we hit the stage. Until then – stay loud, stay proud, and stay bad to the bone.”



BEING HUMAN

HAYES CARLL

Colin Campbell Joshua Black Wilkins

Hayes Carll has spent over two decades crafting songs that cut to the bone with wit, honesty, and heart. Known as much for his razor-sharp storytelling as for his laid-back Texan drawl, Carll's music has always leaned into the roots tradition, blending country, folk, and blues. Now, with his latest album We're Only Human, Carll reveals a side of himself more vulnerable and personal than ever before.
Blues Matters caught up with Hayes Carll recently via video link, he was in Nashville, where he has lived for the past seven years, he spoke openly about his musical beginnings, his struggles to find his own voice, and the deeply personal journey that shaped his latest work.

EARLY ROOTS AND FIRST CHORDS

Carll didn't grow up in a particularly musical family. His father never bought records, and while his mother loved music, neither parent played an instrument still, music found him. "Early on I just loved music," Carll recalls. "It took me to another world, gave me an outlet for my feelings and emotions, and helped me make sense of life. The writers I loved articulated things I couldn't, and they gave me a voice."

At 14, his parents bought him an Alvarez 12-string guitar, a tough instrument for a beginner. With a Mel Bay chord book, Carll stumbled through simple tunes like Camptown Races. The turning point came when he discovered Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson, and Jimmy Buffett songbooks. "I knew all those songs by heart

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and once I saw the chord progressions, this whole world opened up to me.”

FROM DIVE BARS TO SONGWRITERS’ SHRINES

By his early twenties, Carll had left Arkansas and moved to the Texas coast. He lived first in Galveston and then on the Bolivar Peninsula, “a 20-mile-long, half mile-wide stretch of remote beach where people went to hide out or lay low.” There, Carll became the only singer-guitarist for miles, playing in dive bars, shrimp joints, and honky-tonks. “Mostly just covers, because nobody wanted to hear my songs back then,” he admits with a grin. Still, it was a crash course in stagecraft. “It was thrilling and terrifying. Nobody had told me I was any good yet. But I loved songs with such a passion that helped me push through the fear.” Soon, he found a sanctuary for original material: the Old Quarter Acoustic Café in Galveston, run by Rex Bell, bassist for Townes Van Zandt and Lightnin’ Hopkins. Unlike the bar gigs, this was a listening room where songwriting was sacred.

“That was a game changer,” Carll says. “It was a shrine to Townes, Lightnin,’ Blaze Foley all these giants. The bar was set high. It pushed me to raise my standards. But it also taught me I’d never be Townes, never be Guy Clark. I had to find my own thing.”

CHASING HEROES, BECOMING HAYES

Like many young artists, Carll started out as a mimic. “I wanted to be Lyle Lovett, I wanted to be Willie, I wanted to be Kristofferson. But I realised pretty quick that being a bad imitation wasn’t going to get me anywhere.” The journey to discovering his own voice took years. “At first, I was just a poor knockoff of my heroes. It takes time to find confidence in your own perspective. Eventually I got to a place where I could lean into being myself.” Carll’s songwriting process has also evolved. Early on, he treated songs like poetry, starting with lyrics and adding chords later.

These days, he often flips the script, strumming melodies and letting words flow in real time. “I’ll just start singing whatever pops into my head. A lot of times the best ideas come out that way, music, and words born together, unfiltered.”

WE’RE ONLY HUMAN: A PERSONAL RECKONING

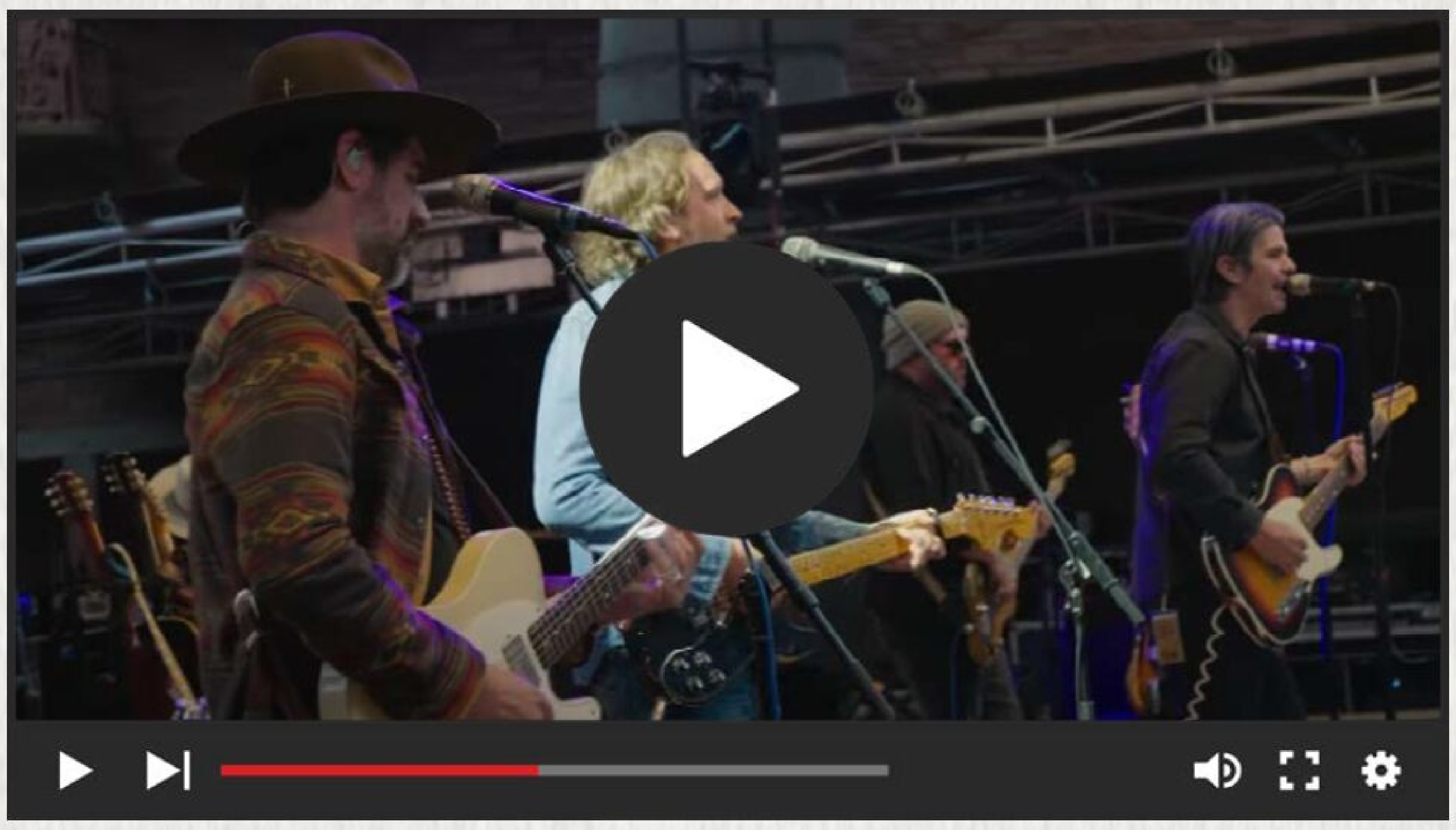
Carll’s latest record, We’re Only Human, is unlike anything he’s released before. Rather than a collection of songs gathered over the years, this was an intentional body of work, an album born from reflection, upheaval, and growth.” The pandemic was a reset for me,” Carll explains. “It was the first time in 25 years I wasn’t on the road. I’d just gone through my second divorce, my son was grown, and I was pushing 50. I didn’t want to keep running into the same walls, having the same frustrations with myself ten years from now. So I sat down and started doing the personal work, trying to live with more ease and grace. For the first time, I married that personal and spiritual work with my songwriting.” The result is his most vulnerable collection yet. “I was always drawn to story songs, rock energy, characters. But I never felt comfortable putting myself directly in the songs. This time, I had to. It’s scary being vulnerable, sharing fears and insecurities but it felt necessary. If people didn’t like it, if they judged me, that wasn’t my concern. What mattered was the honesty.”

THE HEART OF A SONGWRITER

Hayes Carll has come a long way from dive bar covers on the Texas coast. He’s endured self-doubt, divorce, and the constant pull of his heroes’ shadows. But what emerges now is an artist comfortable in his skin, secure in his voice, and committed to truth above all else. “I’m at peace with what I do,” he says simply. “I can’t be Townes, Willie, or Kristofferson. I can only be me. And that’s enough.” With We’re Only Human, Carll reminds us that the blues, at its core, isn’t just about heartache, it’s about honesty. It’s about-facing life head-on, scars and all, and turning it into song. Hayes Carll has done just that, and in doing so, he’s given us not just music, but a mirror.

THE HEART OF THE RECORD: “WE’RE ONLY HUMAN”

When asked about the songs closest to his heart, Carll doesn’t hesitate to start with the title track, We’re Only Human, “This is one I’m really proud of,” Hayes shares. “It’s about acknowledging that this human experience is challenging. No matter who you are, we’re all going to go through struggles. It’s about having grace for ourselves and grace for each other.” The song emerged from his own sense of imperfection. “I felt like I was expected to know how to do everything perfectly, and I was failing miserably at that. Writing this was an acknowledgement, a reminder to myself that it’s okay not to have it all



figured out. Hopefully, listeners can see themselves in it too."

Another standout for him is Stay Here Awhile, a meditation on presence. "My mind is always racing. I live in the past or the future and forget the present. That song is about recognising the importance of slowing down, dropping in, and finding peace in the here and now."

SONGS AS SELF-REMINDERS

Carll admits the album served as therapy as much as craft. "A lot of these songs are reminders to myself. It was sort of a selfish project. I was trying to figure out what was working in my life and what wasn't, then codify that into songs. When I play them live or hear them later, they bring me back to where I want to be." This inward reflection, he explains, isn't about self-indulgence but survival. "The world is distracting, overwhelming. If I can step back, be present with myself and those around me, I've got a better shot at getting through this in one piece." Not all the songs are deeply meditative; some carry sharp wit. Carll laughs when asked about Progress Of Man (Bitcoin and Cattle). "That's the one song on the record that's maybe a little more judgmental," he admits. "These days everybody's opinions are so accessible, what to eat, how to vote, how to exercise, how to live. It's overwhelming. That song is just my little protest, a way of protecting my mental and emotional space." It's social commentary through the lens of a songwriter who has grown weary of the noise. "Recognising the problem is progress. And writing about it helps me reclaim a little peace."

A SONGWRITER'S REFLECTIONS

With a decade-spanning career, Carll approaches albums differently now than he once did. "It's my 10th record. Back in the day, I felt like my whole world depended on how it was received. Now, I've carved out a career, and I'm fortunate that even if this record bombs, I'll still have an audience. That's liberating, I can focus on the art I want to make, not just how people respond." This perspective, he says, is part of the freedom that comes with longevity. "It feels lighter now. I'm proud of what I achieved on this record, and no matter what happens, I'll keep writing."

RECORDING IN AUSTIN: COLLABORATION AND FREEDOM

For We're Only Human, Carll found the perfect partner in Gordy Quist of Band of Heathens. The two had collaborated on a rock-leaning side project, Hayes & The Heathens, before heading into the studio in Austin. Gordy's a great musician and human being. I felt he'd be the right partner to help me navigate such a personal record. We had my band, some of the Heathens, and a lot of local Austin musicians, horn players, a dobro player. It was free, experimental, and pressure-free. We just chased ideas and had fun." That spirit of exploration shines throughout the album, especially on tracks that lean into gospel, roots, and New Orleans-inspired sounds.

THE MENTOR'S VOICE: RAY WYLIE HUBBARD

Carll's connection to legendary songwriter Ray Wylie Hubbard is one of the most personal elements of the album. "Ray was one of the first people to take me out on the road. He showed me what it meant to play for real audiences. He's seen success and rock bottom. Having someone thirty years older, with that wisdom, guiding me—it meant everything. He's been a mentor and friend for 25 years now." On the closing track, May I Never, Carll invited Hubbard, along with Nicole Atkins, Darrell Scott, Shovels and Rope, and others, to share verses. "The song is about staying true to yourself. I thought, advice always carries more weight when it comes from someone you respect. Having those voices sing it with me reinforced the message in a way I couldn't have done alone."

A TOUCH OF RANDY NEWMAN, A DASH OF NEW ORLEANS

Another highlight, Good People, carries an entirely different vibe. "I wrote it on acoustic," Hayes explains, "wanting to remind myself and maybe others, that there's still good in people, even when we disagree." Instead of leaning into seriousness, Carll chose humour and looseness. "It's simple, kind of goofy, very Randy Newman. Then we added horns and a New Orleans groove. It became joyous and fun. Hopefully, when people hear it, it puts them in a better mood and makes them more accepting."

> **“THE SONG IS ABOUT STAYING TRUE TO YOURSELF”**

LOOKING AHEAD, STAYING GROUNDED

Reflecting on the process, Carll describes We’re Only Human as his most artistically free album yet. “I set out with an intention, and I achieved it. That’s gratifying. Whatever happens, I’ll keep writing, keep moving forward.”

It’s fitting. Hayes Carll’s music may wrestle with life’s struggles and contradictions, but it always lands on the side of humility, humour, and humanity. We’re Only Human is proof of that, and perhaps his most timeless work yet.

EXPLORE

MUDDY WATERS

DEEP MUD

AN INTERVIEW WITH MUD MORGANFIELD

When Mud Morganfield steps onto a stage, there's a ripple of recognition before he even sings a note. The eldest son of blues titan Muddy Waters, Morganfield carries a name that shaped the sound of Chicago and influenced the world.

✎ Colin Campbell   📷 Alan Frolichstein

But this is no mere tribute act, his booming voice, magnetic presence, and raw authenticity prove he's more than his father's shadow. With each performance, Mud digs deep into the grit and soul of the blues, honouring the heritage that raised him while telling his own story. In doing so, he keeps the blues alive not as a museum piece, but as a living, breathing force. Blues Matters caught up with him recently to discuss his musical journey and his new release Deep Mud.

Larry "Mud" Morganfield doesn't have to look far to find the blues it's been in his veins since birth. As the eldest son of McKinley Morganfield, the man the world knows as Muddy Waters, Mud was born into a legacy that shaped the very foundation of modern music. But legacy alone doesn't make a bluesman. Over the years, Mud has carved out his own path, blending heritage and individuality in a way that both honours and refreshes the Chicago sound.

"I was born in the blues," he says, his voice carrying that unmistakable resonance passed down through the family line. "My soul was full of his music from birth. Even as a kid, I'd fall asleep tapping rhythms or singing myself to sleep. The music wasn't just around me; it was in me."

FINDING HIS OWN STAGE

Despite his lineage, Mud didn't initially set out to become a professional blues musician. For years, he worked as a truck driver and played drums on the side. But in 1997, a pivotal moment changed everything. That year, he and his mother watched the Kennedy Center's Muddy Waters tribute on television. Koko Taylor, Bo Diddley, Buddy Guy, Bob Margolin, the lineup was a who's who of blues royalty. But as the show ended, something was missing. "When the credits rolled, my name wasn't mentioned," Mud recalls. "I walked back into the room and found my mother crying. That broke me. I vowed that day it would never happen again. I decided I had to take an active role in my father's legacy." It was a turning point, and Mud hasn't looked back since.

DEEP
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THE VOICE OF BLOODLINES

Audiences who hear Mud sing often do a double take. His voice carries an uncanny resemblance to Muddy's, both in its raw power and its soulful phrasing. For Mud, it's both a blessing and a burden.

"Sometimes it's a double-edged sword," he admits. "I was born with this gift, but some people think I'm trying to copy him. The truth is, I'm the closest you can get to his legacy in the 21st century. I'm not copying, I was blessed with it."

When performing his father's songs, Mud doesn't worry about striking a balance between tradition and reinvention. "I just do them," he says simply. "People love my dad all over the world, and I've had folks come up to me crying because of how much the music moved them. Once I learn the lyrics, the rest comes naturally. My heritage takes over."

LESSONS FROM THE MASTERS

Along the way, Mud has drawn inspiration not only from his father but from those who collaborated with him. Chief among them is guitarist Rick Kreher, who played with Muddy in his later years.
"My dad trusted him completely," Mud says. "When I found out Pop let Rick take home Horse, his main Telecaster, after a gig, man that told me everything. He never let that guitar out of his sight. Rick's a true bluesman, and he's been a huge part of my music career."

CHICAGO BLUES, SOUTH SIDE STRUGGLES

Mud's life in Chicago gave him a firsthand education in the blues beyond the stage. Growing up on the South Side, he saw hardship and danger everywhere.

"I grew up in the thick of it, pimps, hustlers, drug dealers, gangs, violence. It was rough. 43rd and Lake Park was no joke, worse than the West Side. Now, I can't claim the struggles my ancestors faced in the South, but I had my own hardships on those streets. That was my blues."

Those experiences shaped his songwriting, which he describes as a natural process rather than an academic exercise. "I let it flow. If something hits me and I like it, I figure the world will like it too. I always start with the bass line, then piece it together bit by bit."

One song from the new album, Deep Mud is, A Dream Walking. This came out of a deeply personal moment; it was the day doctors told him there was nothing more they could do for his mother. "She was my biggest supporter from day one. Her love is still the music in my heart. That song came straight out of that pain."

TRADITION AND EVOLUTION

Talk to Mud about the future of the blues and you'll hear a man with one foot firmly planted in tradition and the other pushing forward. "I can see both sides," he says. "Blues can evolve while still paying homage to the traditions. That's what I try to do. If I can take the music in a new direction while still honouring my father, then it's a win."

That philosophy has served him well on both sides of the Atlantic. His first time playing in England remains etched in his memory. "I heard my dad's music blasting out of windows. People across the ocean really love Chicago blues. They're so respectful, too, they sit quiet during the show, really listening."

On stage, he often feels his father's presence guiding him. "Every time I hit the stage, it's like Pop is right there in me and with me, spiritually."

"I want people to be happy, smiling, having a good time"

SHARING THE STAGE

Mud has shared bills with legends across the spectrum, from blues icons to soul superstars. "I've hung with Erykah Badu, Diana Ross, Herbie Hancock, Gladys Knight, Larry Graham at North Sea Jazz Fest. In Australia, I spent time with Mavis Staples and Santana. Everyone's interesting in their own way."

But it's still Kreher's slide guitar that makes him feel closest to home. "When Rick plays, it's the closest thing to being on stage with my father."

DEEP MUD

Mud's latest release, Deep Mud, continues that blend of roots and individuality. While the songs vary in style, many touch on love, women, and relationships. Ernestine is one of my favourites," he says. "I'm proud of the lyrics and the funky groove. Then there's The Man That You're With, this is in a pure traditional Chicago style. Bring Me My Whiskey, well, Studebaker John took that from a straight blues arrangement to something totally different and catchy."

For Mud, recording will never match the thrill of live performance. "I prefer live shows every time. The energy I get from an audience, that's what fuels me."

LESSONS THAT LAST

From Muddy himself came lessons that extend beyond music. "My dad told me, back when I was drumming, 'Don't sell yourself cheap.' You can always come down on your fee, but you can't go up. People talk, and you set the standard for how you're treated. If you sell yourself cheap, you'll always be paid cheap." It's advice Mud has carried into every corner of his career.

HEALING THROUGH THE BLUES

What does he hope audiences take away from his shows? "I want people to be happy, smiling, having a good time. Blues is healing music. I try to keep it funky and moving so folks leave lifted."

That passion fuels his love of the road. Touring remains a joy, and he has his sights firmly set on the UK once again. "The UK feels like my second home. I've played the festivals; I've got fans who really love the music there. I can't wait to bring Deep Mud over. Like Pop used to say: I'm Ready!"

KEEPING THE FLAME ALIVE

For Mud Morganfield, carrying his father's name is more than heritage it's more like a mission. He's determined to keep the blues alive, evolving yet rooted, personal yet universal.

"Thank you for listening to my story," he says in closing. "I hope you'll enjoy the new album. If you do, tell your friends. Spread the word and share the blues. Let's keep it going strong."

With Deep Mud his new release, Mud Morganfield proves once again that while Muddy Waters may be gone, the river still runs deep, helping to keep the blues alive for a newer generation.

EXPLORE

Anne Harris

2025
BIG BLUES
BENDER

Many blues fans spend an entire year anticipating the annual Big Blues Bender, a four-day blues festival that takes place within one hotel in Las Vegas. AJ and Laurie Gross, in partnership with Musical Director, Jimmy Carpenter, provide this annual ultimate blues experience.

✎ Anita Shlank 📷 Laura Carbone

And, every year, they are faced with the challenge of how to surpass the incredibly high bar set by the prior Benders. This year, without a doubt, they once again succeeded in meeting that goal. Their formula contains just the right balance in the lineup of repeat “favorite” performers and exposure for new artists, along with the perfect mix of traditional, blues-rock, and gospel-blues sets.

As is customary, there was a star-studded pre-event benefit show for the HART fund, a division of the Blues Foundation that reimburses blues musicians for medical, dental, mental health and funeral expenses they cannot afford to pay. Once again, an impressive array of talented artists provided a preview to their Bender sets, and over $90,000 was raised for this wonderful cause.

The 41 bands/artists on the unsurpassed Bender schedule featured many familiar favorites, such as Southern Hospitality, Sugaray Rayford, Walter Trout, Samantha Fish, Tab Benoit and the Bender Brass Band. But it was also the first opportunity for most attendees to be able to hear exciting new artists such as Katie Skene, IBC Band Winner Josh Hoyer & Soul Colossal, and IBC solo/duo winner Joce Reyome (who delighted the audience not just with her impressive vocals but also her on-target animal impersonations and quirky jokes). With it being their first time at the Bender, (and having not played very often in the United States previously), Australian band The Teskey Brothers probably ignited the highest level of anticipation, and they did not disappoint with their performance. And anyone who had not already seen JJ Grey & Mofro became instant fans following their exceptional, uplifting performance.

The same was true for soulful singer, Sierra Green, who was featured in Devon Allman’s latest project—the Blues Summit (which also featured Larry McCray and Jimmy Hall). And it was the first opportunity for some attendees to witness the magic that happens any time Luther Dickinson joins JD Simo. Additionally, Kirk Fletcher proved that he has made a victorious comeback after suffering a stroke onstage in 2023. He demonstrated to Bender attendees why he has been described by Joe Bonamassa as “one of the greatest traditional blues players of all time”.

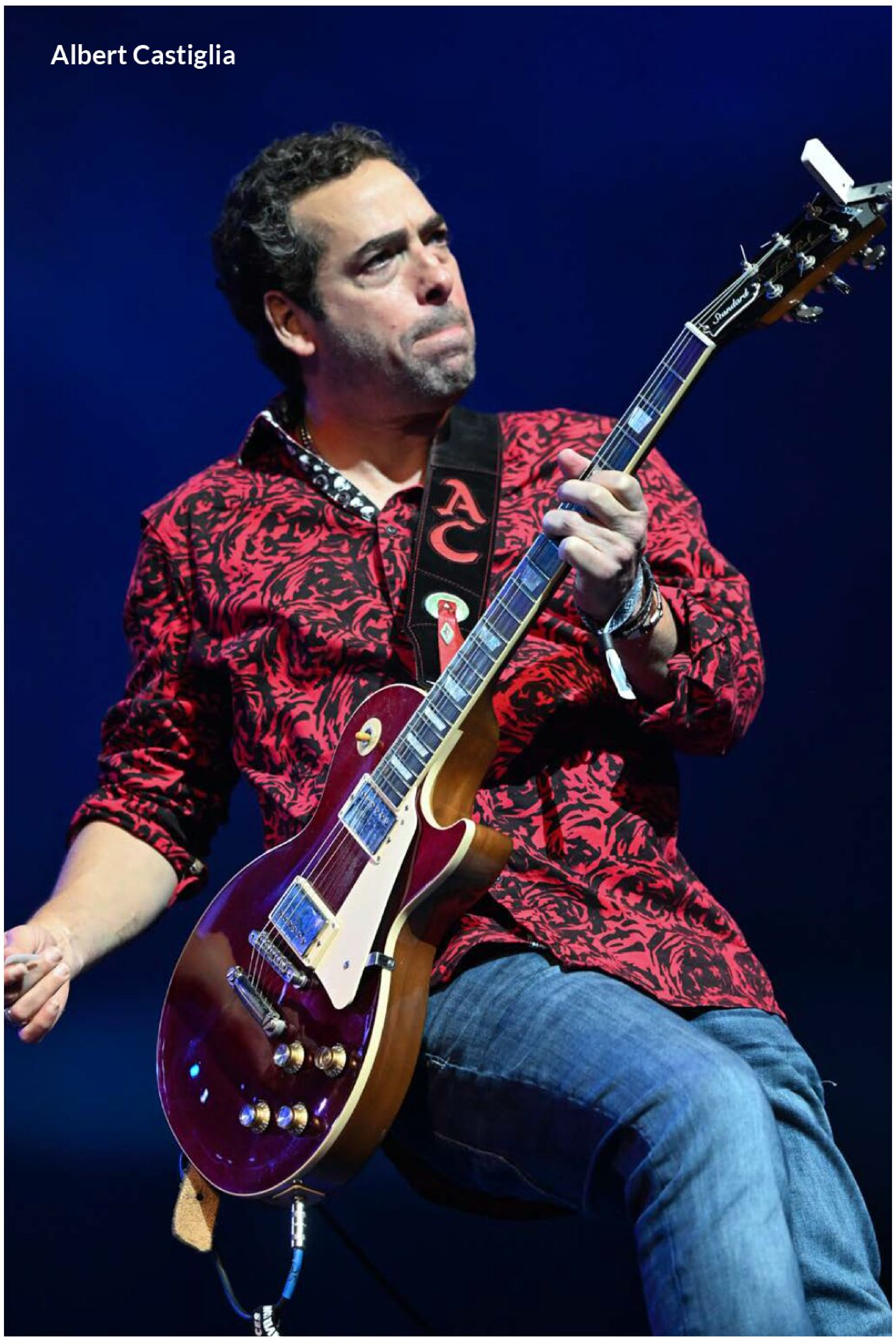
“Benderheads” (a name affectionately given to those fans who return every year to this event), were treated to several special events, such as a talk by Alligator Records President, Bruce Iglauer, a “Harp Bender” hosted by Monk with Joe Nosek, Chris O’Leary and Will Wilde, a focus on the bluesier aspects of The Grateful Dead with the Jimmy Carpenter Band, and a set in which Stanley Jordan acknowledged the gifts of the late, great Jimi Hendrix. Additionally, a Bender One Series: “One for the 88’s”, was hosted by Victor Wainwright, and featured guests Dave Keyes, Red Young, Jon Cleary, Bruce Katz, Lee Kanehira, and Leon Blue, (with vocalists Lara Price and Sugaray Rayford) and offered an in-depth celebration of the role of keyboards in blues music. On Sunday, attendees were treated to a special event when Sugaray Rayford gathered some friends for a celebration of gospel music.

Last year, actor Bill Murray was a surprise guest at the Bender and joined The Blood Brothers (Mike Zito and Albert Castiglia) on stage. Some may have thought he was an unusual choice for a special guest, but Murray actually has a life-long fascination with various genres of music. It has been reported that he learned to play some piano for two of his movie roles, and he has collaborated with cellist Jan Vogler to release a CD combining literature with music. Since his first performance at the Bender, Murray has gone on to tour extensively with the Blood Brothers and was a welcome return special guest at this year's event.

There are a few artists at the Bender whose contributions are so unique that it is hard to imagine others being able to replicate what they do. Musical Director, Jimmy Carpenter, prepares charts and leads an outstanding collection of musicians in the Bender Brass Band (including Nick Schnebelen, Red Young, David Kida, Mike Merritt, Eddie Rich and Mark Pender) with such skill that they appear to effortlessly master the music of all the guest artists they support. Anne Harris' superb skills on the violin are matched by the stunning visual image of her elegant movements which combine sensual belly dancing elements and startlingly deep back bends. Her contribution as a member of JP Soars' Gypsy Blue Revue, her collaboration with Danielle Nicole, and her stunning partnership with Tab Benoit for a version of his beautiful song "Long Lonely Bayou", were standout moments that nobody will forget.

Throughout each day, Chris "Bad News" Barnes raced tirelessly between venues to introduce artists with his unparalleled energy. And the Bender wrapped up on the final night with the always popular "Mayor of Benderville", Tab Benoit. Benoit's commitment to the music could be seen as he did not leave the stage once throughout the two- and one-half-hour show, during which he brought out the best in numerous guest artists for his "Midnight Ramble" jam.

This summary represents only a fraction of the amazingly talented artists performing at the Bender, but hopefully it offers some insight into why so many attendees are remarkably quick to prebook for the following year. You too can become a "Benderhead" and join the family for next year's celebration by visiting www.bigbluesbender.com.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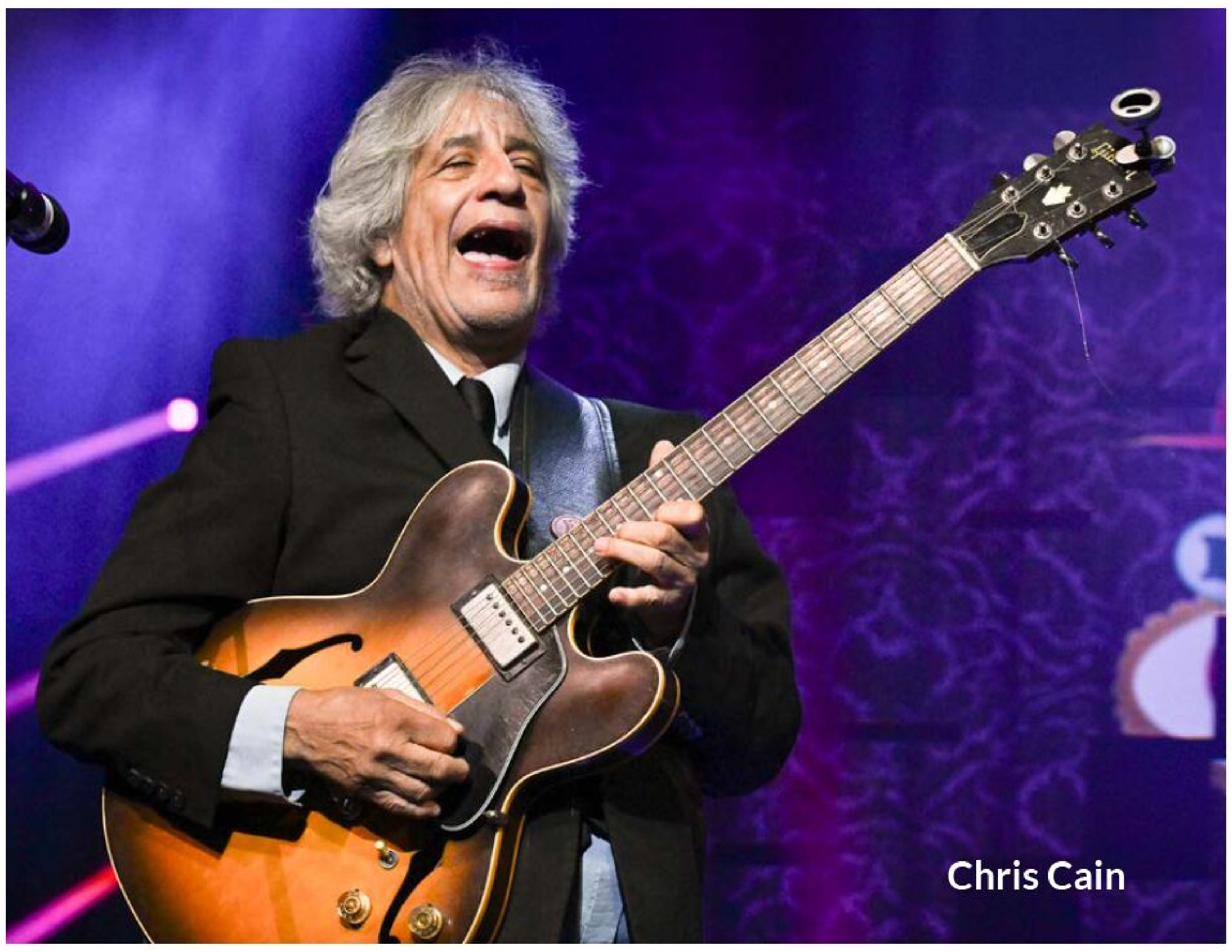
Chris Cain

Danielle Nicole and Brandon Miller

DK Harrell

Devon Allman

Big Blues Bender

Jimmy Carpenter

Mike Zito

Samantha Fish

Stroh's
BEER

KIRK FLETCHER
KEEPS ON PUSHING

Paul Long As credited

Kirk Fletcher has long been regarded as one of the finest traditional blues guitarists of his generation, praised by the likes of Joe Bonamassa and revered by audiences worldwide. Yet his story is as much about resilience and evolution as it is about guitar mastery. From gospel roots in California to international stages, and from early collaborations to a near life-changing health scare, Fletcher has never stopped pushing forward.

Stroh's
BEER

“I SAVED EVERY PENNY TO RECORD AT FAME STUDIOS”

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GOSPEL ROOTS IN CALIFORNIA

Growing up in California in the 1980s, music was everywhere in Fletcher's home - though not always the kind people might expect.

"I really grew up in the eighties and we really started with the cassette," he explains. "Gospel music was the thing because my father was a pastor. I had a real connection with a lot of the songs in church. What they listened to in their free time was all gospel, because they felt there was a great divide between worldly music like B.B. King and T-Bone Walker, and religious music like Shirley Caesar, The Dixie Hummingbirds and The Five Blind Boys. I didn't realise it at the time, but that really set me up for what I do now."

Music entered his own life naturally through family. "My older brother played in my father's church. I started seeing him play when I was seven or eight and I just picked it up. It wasn't even a choice, it was something that came over me. I wanted the guitar in my hands all the time. I got enormous excitement from the sound of the guitar, the way it looked, everything."

BAPTISM BY FIRE IN CHURCH BANDS

Fletcher's first performances were immediate and intimidating. "Playing in church is on-the-job training. You're playing in front of people from day one, even when you can't really play. You learn fast because you're trying to accompany singers who don't know the key they're in or the melody all the way, and you've got to make it sound presentable. That was invaluable for me."

APPRENTICESHIP ON THE WEST COAST

In his school years and early career, Fletcher worked his way through gospel bands, R&B outfits and eventually the West Coast blues circuit. "I played with all the harmonica players - Al Blake from the Hollywood Fats Band, Linwood Slim, James Harman, all those guys. I met Kim Wilson through Al Blake and we hit it off. I really wanted to be in Kim Wilson's blues band. Then I played with Charlie Musselwhite and toured with him for two years, all over Europe and the States. I had a good time and I learned a lot about myself, about my playing, and about finding my own style."

THE FABULOUS THUNDERBIRDS AND BEYOND

By the mid-2000s Fletcher was standing on major stages. He remembers 2007 with the Fabulous Thunderbirds at the London Astoria. “Painted On, yeah, that was a lot of fun. I was like, wow, I get to record with these guys? It was a dream.”

eep On Pushing

Even as a guitarist admired for his tone and phrasing, Fletcher soon realised he needed to add singing and songwriting to his repertoire. “My first records were me on guitar with other singers. That was cool, but I knew I couldn’t just be the instrumental guy. Blues musicians need to sing, to write, to lead. I was inspired by people like Nick Curran and Gary Clark Jr — guys who could do it all. I figured I had better try the same.”

THE INFLUENCE OF ROCKPILE

While his grounding was blues, Fletcher’s listening has always been wide. “You know what I’ve been listening to a lot lately? Rockpile, with Dave Edmunds and Nick Lowe. The songwriting, the singing, they were incredible. Kim Wilson always spoke highly of Rockpile and Dave Edmunds. Dave even produced some of the T-Birds’ records.”

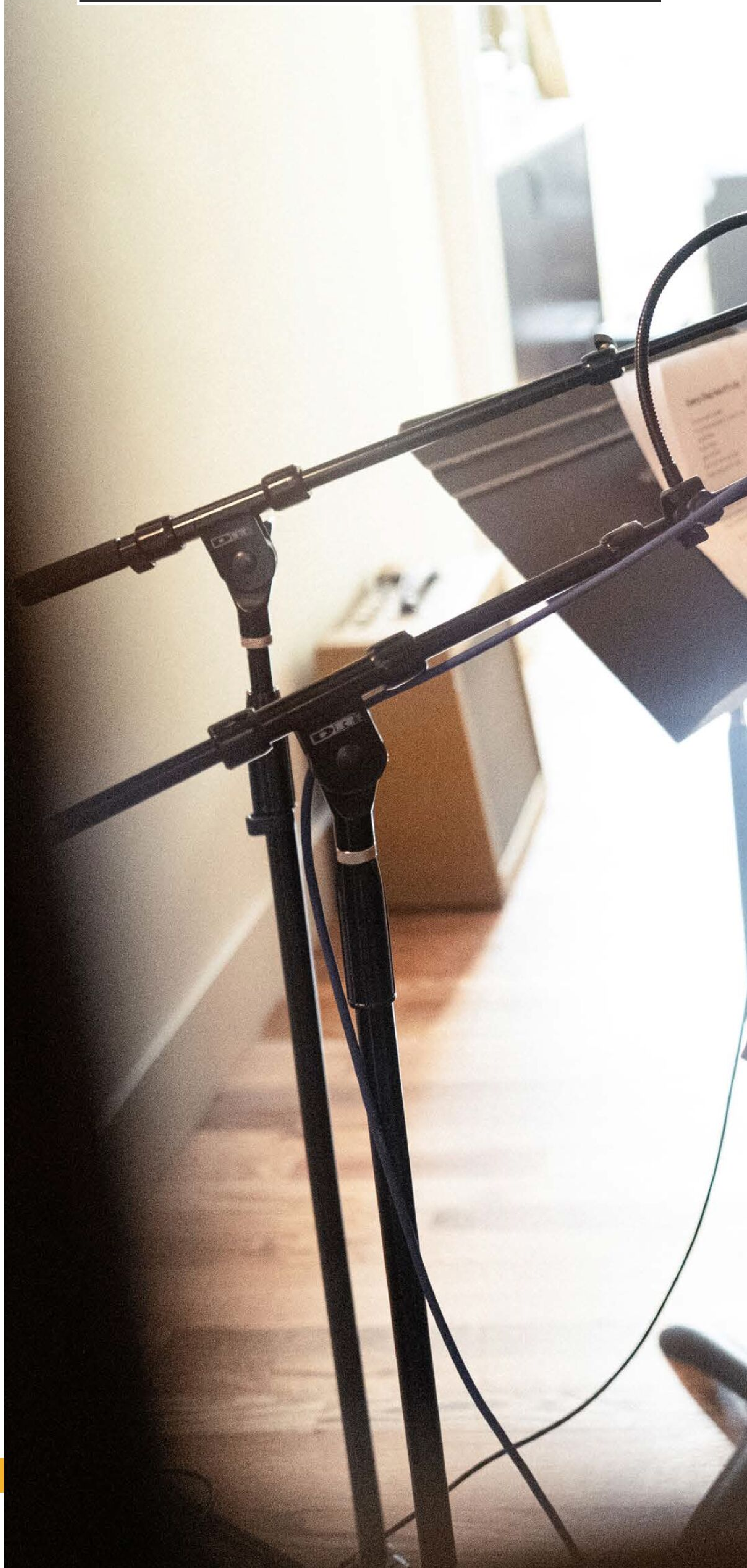
RECORDING HEARTACHE BY THE POUND AT FAME STUDIOS

The pandemic forced Fletcher to take stock. “After I got home, I thought, if I never record another album, where do I want to do it? I wanted Fame Studios. That place is the Holy Grail — Wilson Pickett, the Staple Singers, Otis Rush. A melting pot of blues, soul, rock and roll. I saved up and made it happen.”

He was joined by Richard Cousins, bassist and co-writer with Robert Cray. “Richard is a soul music fanatic like me. Having him there made everything joyful. The songs came easily once I decided on Fame. His presence and talent just made it all cool. He was kind, he worked hard, he was there for the right reasons. It was an incredible experience.”

A LIFE-CHANGING MOMENT

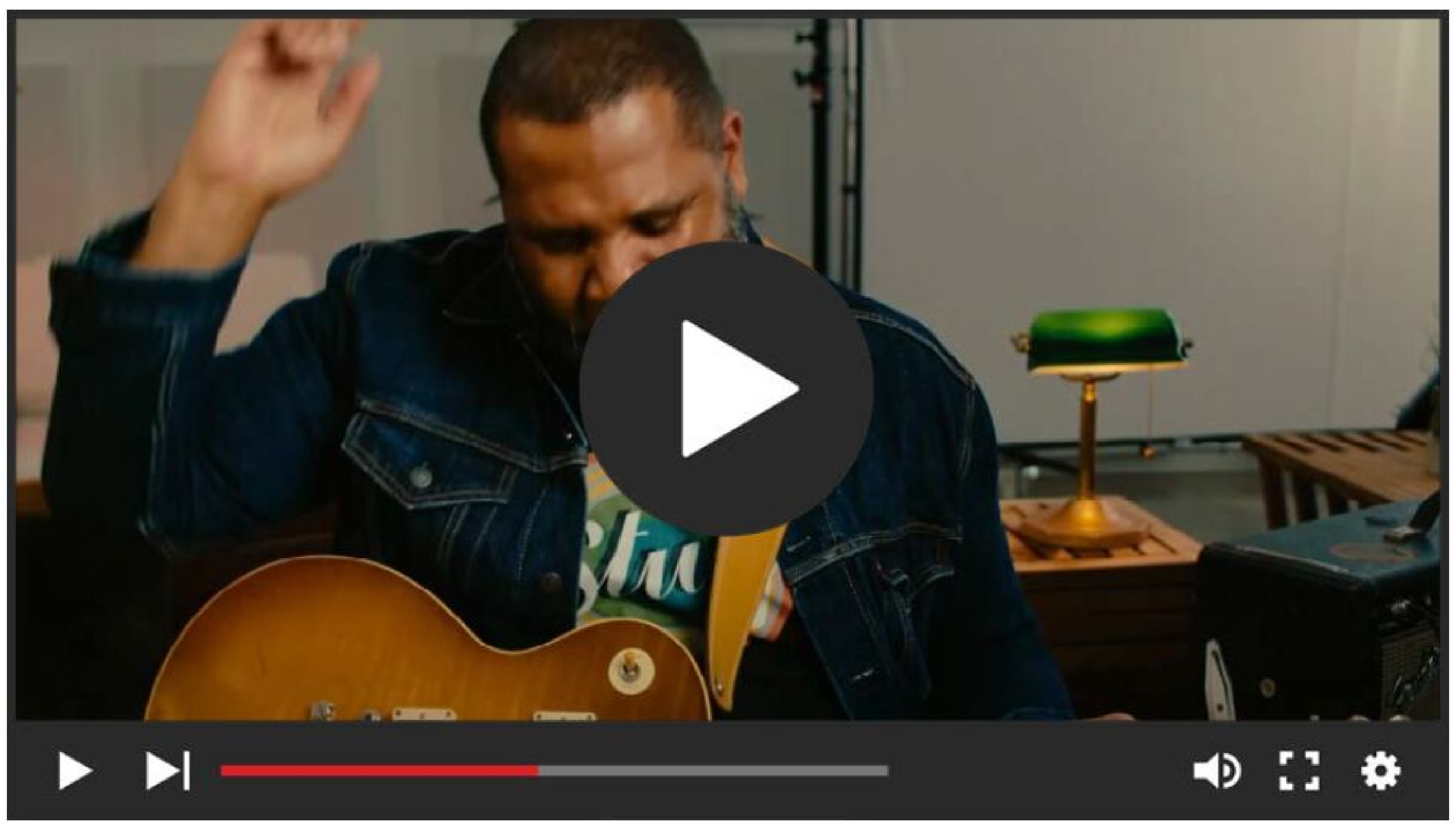
In July 2023, Fletcher collapsed on stage in Nashville with JD Simo. “I had a stroke on stage at the Eastside Bowl. My whole world turned upside down. I didn’t know what the outcome would be. It’s been a process since then. I still have limita-



“WE ONLY DID ONE TAKE IF WE COULD HELP IT”

Gibson
USA
NASHVILLE

"IF I CAN TALK
ABOUT THE BLUES,
I'M HAPPY"



tions, but not enough to stop me having a good time. I'm just glad to be here and able to play."

KEEP ON PUSHING

That experience fed into his latest record, Keep On Pushing, co-produced with JD Simo. "I picked most of the songs myself, but JD helped sonically - he pointed me in the direction of the sound I heard in my head. We recorded live on the floor, one or two takes at most. No pedals, just plugged straight into a Premier amp in Joe McMahan's kitchen."

The album features reinterpretations of Big Bill Broonzy's Just a Dream and T-Bone Walker's Here in the Dark alongside new material. "Just a Dream always struck me, I loved the lyric. And Here in the Dark, the original recording is such a mood, such a vibe. I wanted to capture that."

There is still room for Fletcher's own instrumental voice, as heard on Croke. "That's unmistakably me," he laughs.

INTRODUCING THE BLUES TO NEW AUDIENCES

Fletcher hopes his music will carry the torch to younger listeners. "That's half the reason I do this - to excite the next generation about the blues. During the pandemic I realised how important that is. If I can talk about blues, about guitar, about singing, I'm happy. We just have to keep putting out music and keep going. I don't want to stop. I'm not going to stop."

Through gospel beginnings, apprenticeships with greats, trials and triumphs, Kirk Fletcher remains a true believer in the music. His latest chapter is proof that no matter what life throws at you, the blues will keep on pushing.

EXPLORE

MEET JEFF DE LIA

KEEPING THE REAL BLUES RELEVANT

Steve Yourglivch   Joshua Black Wilkins, 72 Music Management, Adam Ayers

You might not have heard of Jeff De Lia but he is a significant and well-respected figure in the Blues Community across the USA. As a music loving teenager he had already decided he wanted to become an artist manager and now aged 36 he has 13 years' experience working alongside some of the worlds most revered and successful artists. He has the absolute trust of old school, business hardened performers like Bobby Rush and The Blind Boys Of Alabama, both of whom he has helped achieve some of the most successful periods of their careers. He is also currently providing the strategies to help talented acts like The North Mississippi Allstars and ZZ Ward expand their fanbases and reputations.

I had admired Jeff's work from afar for some time and was thrilled to meet him recently when Bobby Rush was touring with Kenny Wayne Shepherd in London. Jeff agreed to me interviewing him and we linked up on zoom a few weeks later.

I wanted to discover from Jeff how long he had been working with Bobby Rush because clearly Bobby has been a legendary figure in the blues world for decades but since Jeff came on board his career has been in its ascendency. The same can be said for The Blind Boys Of Alabama too. What's the secret formula?

'I'm so honoured. Thank you so much for having me on and for your kind words. You know, it was a dream of mine to be a manager when I was a young lad, 16 years old, when I decided that that's what I wanted to do. Yeah. I think I told you when we hung out in England that there's not really an obvious explanation for how a young 20-something-year-old from Kansas ends up managing artists like Bobby Rush and the Blind Boys with such a long legacy and career for both before my parents were even born. So, yeah, as far as the secret is concerned, I wish I knew what the secret was, because it would be even further. But I think the secret sauce, so to speak, of management is making sure the artists are heard, you know, really listening to them and being an ally and a supporter and a confidant and a creative and business collaborator. And so, there's like multiple channels happening at the same time. There's a channel and connection, between the artist and myself. Well, the parallel path of myself in our teams, between each and everyone on the team. And I suppose that, you know, for me, after managing full-time for over 12 years and putting out over 35 re-

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leases commercially with my roster and some past artists, I've come to realize that not to, like, you know, toot my own horn or anything like that, but I've come to realize that kind of project management, helping to sometimes collaborate on a creative project, giving the direction, but especially once the finished product is done, finding its home and working with the team to roll it out and roll it out successfully in a way that honours the music and the project, but also helps elevate, keep the artists relevant, but elevate their brand, their press, their radio, awards and things of that nature. So I think I've come to have a very good vision for how to execute that and no project is alike to the other within an artist's career and from artist to artist you know you always have different things, like for Bobby for example, it's just a small thing but it's a great example, is for independent record shops we created a little Bobby Rush all my love for you candle. For Bobby's pre-order campaign for Porcupine Meat we had a light switch cover that was an image of Bobby and you can imagine if you're turning it on and off what part of it is the switch. Different things like that, you come up with creative ideas in order to help sell the project and those things end up making you different. So anyway, those are just some things off the top of my head that I think have really helped me anchor my business and the business of my clients.'

I was also aware that Jeff had helped manage Dom Flemons for a time who although a young man was someone passionately committed to keeping an older style of folk blues alive.

'Yeah, absolutely. I worked with Dom for about seven or eight years, and I came in with his project, Black Cowboys, that he handed to me at a Grammy week party when we met for the first time, before it had come out, and I was just mesmerized by what he had created with his 40-page liner notes outlining the history of Black Cowboys, and the songs that were both originals about Black Cowboys and originals from Black Cowboys that he had worked with, Smithsonian Folkways and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and I'm like, I've never seen anything like this before, and I ended up managing Dom and working together for a long time, and he's a historian, he's a musicologist, he's a collector, his knowledge of music, I mean, on anything, you could talk to him about Mississippi John Purdy. Or, um, music from, you know, roots. The origins of Ruth's music from the 19th century, you know, and he would have a whole essay for you of information. And so, you know, he was a great, he's a great conduit for sharing history in documentaries and on panels and through his music. And his show incorporates music that spans over 100 years. He plays instruments that a lot of people, you know, don't play like the rhythm bones, the quills. And of course, he plays the banjo and other things like that. And yeah, it's traditional music. Its folk, its bluegrass, its blues, it encompasses all of that. And he's a great bridge for a young person. His thing was always about preserving that history and carrying it forward in their own way, and he stayed true to that, and you know, bringing it back to the Blind Boys or Bobby, who you mentioned before, that's like the Blind Boys, you know, Dom has had the opportunity to cross into other terrain musically, more modern music, the Blind Boys got offered the same record deal that Sam Cooke did, to cross over into secular music, back before Sam Cooke became Sam Cooke, and they found it important then and find it important now to stay true to

their roots, and to be a gospel group that performs mostly traditional gospel music. Now they do some secular material, but they still do it in their own way. So yeah, I think that's important in 2025, as we move forward and push the boundaries of music, that there are some torchbearers, that there are some people that are still carrying that lineage and that history forward.'

I told Jeff how interesting I found it that as a young man he had attached so much importance to the legacy of the roots of the blues generally and his artists in particular. 'Thank you. I'm 36 and, you know, I've been doing this, for 13 years. It's been my mission, you know, every day, full-time schedule devoted to roots music, creating, helping those create it, and pushing it out there, and amplifying it in the best way that we can.'

I think Bobby Rush is just brilliant, he's just such a character, one of things I admire Bobby Rush for, is that when I interviewed him, you know, he talked about playing the Chitlin' Circuit, and he went through all of that time when being a black musician was not a very easy thing at all. And yet he embraces young people like you. He's positive. He doesn't appear to be bitter about his past or opportunities that may have passed him by.

'Well, he feels, I believe, sad about some of the elements of it in its past. He still has a generally positive take on it and finds that it's important that it lives on and that he caters to it. You know, when Rolling Stone magazine coined or titled him the King of the Chitlin' Circuit back when the Scorsese series, The Blues, came out on PBS, in the early 2000s, that was a title that kind of stuck with him. And when I started managing him, to this day, we utilize it. But when I started managing him between 2014 and probably 2019, let's say, that was front and centre, Bobby Rush, King of the Chitlin' Circuit. But since Porcupine Meat other elements of his success in the past let's say eight years might be mentioned like Grammy Winner or Three-time Grammy Winner or blues icon or blues legend or something but we still respect that history and that phrasing but I think he started to reach a more mainstream and global audience in a way that he hadn't ever in his career and that's exhibited by the month-long tour we just did for huge audiences across Europe as well as what he continues to do in the States and internationally, it's been it's a blessing to be a part of that. I think we're a great team on the business front. And, you know, he often speaks about, searching for someone who got him and he could let go into big meetings or handle certain things and know that it was going to be taken care of and taken care of in a way that protects him and elevates the business. But with that being said, there's no coaching, training, or tutoring Bobby Rush on being an entertainer and being the charismatic spirit in interpersonal communications or from the stage that he is.'

I've heard Jeff say in the past that he likes to offer some guidance and input into an artist's creative side of things. I wondered if he viewed this as a major part of his job. 'Absolutely, I think that is one of the big elements of artist management that inspired me to get into this work in the first place was my desire to be involved creatively but recognising that I'm not a full-on creator myself. I'm not a songwriter I'm not a record producer, I'm not a musician, or mixing engineer. So that has been a constant thread through all the work I've done all these years, is my desire to be involved in the creative. But that has to be balanced with not overstepping, not pushing the agenda. That's not something that I wear on my sleeve, or I put front and centre publicly, or in the work that I do with the artists. It just needs to develop organically. And it does. It does enough that I'm fuelled creatively in the work that I do, and it works well. From the very beginning, from my very first client, we were working on bringing in some iconic producers. collaborators on a record and all the way through to this day you know that's something that I think I've really been pretty good at, is helping to curate really cool creative collaborations, for example one of the first big things I came up with for the Blind Boys as I came in as a co-manager with Charles Street, their longtime manager, was a collaboration with Bela Fleck who had never done anything with the Blind Boys or gospel artists and they did this record 'I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free' a classic cover, it was great and it got nominated for a Grammy and it was the beginning of this new period of success for the Blind Boys after a bit of a lapse. And so, you know, I didn't necessarily work on the record itself. Most times I'm more involved, but even just sprinkling my management dust through an idea and bringing the people together is inspiring to me, and I think it can be very successful for the artists. Every artist is different so sometimes, I'll be more involved in that process and sometimes they've got it. Artist to artist or record to record it varies. With North Mississippi Allstars they've got that pretty dialled in. I think on their last record I suggested some collaborations based on what the project was and what they were going for, that they ended up you know manifesting which was cool. For them they're doing other things like I'm co-producing a documentary with Cody and there's music camps that we are talking about collaborating on, different types of projects whether it's a book or film or whatever so we get creative in other ways.'

The most recent artist Jeff has started to work with is ZZ Ward, another artist I'm a fan of, but different to the others on his roster.

'Slightly different but she's inspired by, influenced and rooted in blues music. She learned to play harmonica from her dad at a young age, he was in a blues band, and she grew up watching people some of which are among my friends or clients now. She grew up watching Kev Mo live, The Blind Boys of Alabama and folks like Susan Tedeschi and Bonnie Raitt. As a young person pretty close to my age, she ended up linking to hip-hop and pop music, and so her first couple records were not so rooted in blues, they sounded, I think, sonically a bit more commercial, pop, triple-A kind of vibe, and as a result, on a major label, she had some hits, and that really blossomed her career from all the TV stuff she did, and the performance at Bonnaroo, and Coachella, and things of that nature, but I think she's finally found a home as an artist, and with a record company, that she's able to spread her wings and honour the roots that she comes from, and that's really that of a contemporary blues artist. It's like she kind of flipped the script on the new album, you can hear the elements of the pop sounds that came on records but it's contemporary blues all the way. She's recording for Sun and I know that's been a dream of hers and frankly for me as a manager to be to be talking to and working with Sun, obviously it's new people but again that rich legacy absolutely.

Finally I wanted to know what thoughts Jeff might have about attracting a younger audience to blues music, essential for the genre as we know it to survive.
'Just personally, I think people connect to people that they can see in themselves. So, young people are typically, unless they're influenced at a young age by something that's a legacy act, they're typically following along artists that are also close to their age, dependent upon what genre they're into, whether it's blues, hip-hop, rock, or otherwise. And so, I think when you get a new wave of young artists, whether it's Kingfish or Gary Clark Jr. or whatever, they're going to pull in the young folks. Now, if they're going and playing festivals or playing clubs that are heavily promoted by the blues societies, they're probably going to bring the traditional blues audience, which is older at this point. But I think the Samantha Fishes of the world and the Larkin Poes of the world, the Gary Clarks of the world, and now even this young D.K. Harrell, who's very King-like, they're going to bring in the young people.

Bobby Rush and I finished our tour in Italy at the Transomino Blues Festival, and we watched D.K. play the night before Bobby, and he had a full house there. It was at this Middle Ages castle, but there were all these young dancers. We're not talking vibing a little bit. like full-on like swing dancing right to his music and they were younger than me, probably 25 to 30 years old and the place had probably five-six hundred people and mostly seated because that's how it was set up but there was like 30 to 40 of these people just going at it and that was very refreshing. That's very encouraging I think that's a snapshot of what exists around the world. It's also what venue you're playing in certain places for example I've seen very young audiences at Bobby shows, like Valencia he played a rock club. I met people who were in their 20s 30s that were like, oh yeah you know I'm just a fan of music, I live in town and I wanted to come even though I've never heard of Bobby Rush, I checked him out and here I am. The Blue Note in New York is a great example of somewhere people go to if they're looking for something fun to do and they know the Blue Note is this legendary jazz blues club in the Village and so they just swing by and you get people of all ages from all places around the world coming through and they probably didn't even know who Bobby was.'

BURNING ROPE

BURNING ROPE
BEGIN AGAIN

Stephen Harrison   Supplied

After the loss of Catfish frontman Matt Long, keyboardist-vocalist Paul Long took time to decide whether he had more music to give. Burning Rope is his answer: a new band built on old friendships, fresh songs and a live-first spirit.

LISTEN
TO THIS INTERVIEW
YOUTUBE

From Catfish to Burning Rope

“After Matt passed there’s obviously no Catfish without Matt,” Paul tells Blues Matters. “Eventually I decided that I did want to do some music somehow. At the end of the day you are a musician and the musician plays music.” The core came together naturally. Bassist Adam Pyke had been with Catfish since 2017. Drummer Mitch Weaving was the band’s dependable dep for the final 18 months. Guitarist Alex Voysey leads his own Alex Boice Band, whose last album Paul produced. Alex had also stepped in for Matt at a benefit show, learning half an hour of Catfish material at short notice. When the time came, asking him to join “was not a decision at all.”

Two rehearsals later, Burning Rope played its first gig in April. “Venues like Upton and Colne took a chance on us based on reputation,” Paul says. “That gets you the first gig. You still have to earn the second.”

Built to play live

“We are a live band,” Paul stresses. “It’s always been about getting that interaction with an audience and setting a mood in the room.” That philosophy shaped the record too. The basic tracks were cut live on the studio floor in just two days, with vocals and light overdubs added later at Paul’s place.

A wider palette

Listen closely and you’ll still hear echoes of Catfish, but Burning Rope leans into new colours. “Matt was the heavy songwriter in Catfish. My songs were usually the contrast,” Paul explains. “With Alex’s very different tone and approach, the field feels broader. We’ve kept it heavy where we can, but there’s more space, more shade.” Only one song on the debut was co-written in the studio by all four members. “That’s the plan going forward,” Paul says. “We’ve already demoed five tracks for the next release. With four writers, it’ll evolve and become less about me and more about the band.”

Writing with honesty

Two of the album’s key moments, Before the Landslide and Life in Reverse, address Matt directly. “Before the Landslide was particularly hard,” Paul admits. “I wrote most of it before Matt passed. It took a long time to finish and I used to struggle to sing it. I’ll always dedicate that one to him.”

> ***“We are a live band. It’s about setting a mood in the room.”***

The title Life in Reverse came from a conversation. “A friend said, ‘You can’t live your life in reverse.’ I thought, I’m stealing that,” he laughs. “You get ten percent inspiration, ninety percent perspiration. I work hard on lyrics and try to steer clear of the old tropes. I can’t sing about cotton fields or government mules. I have to sing about my life. Authentic words connect.”

Deep cut, bold choice

One surprise on the record is a slow-burning take on an early Elton John and Bernie Taupin song. “I’m a huge fan of that 1970 to ’76 run,” Paul says. “This one’s a deep cut from Honky Château era, rooted in the blues scale. We wanted a slow song with drama, not just something quiet, and it fit perfectly.”

Pink Floyd in the DNA

There’s a cinematic feel running through the album that listeners have clocked as Floyd-tinged. Paul is delighted. “Pink Floyd is deep in my DNA, and in Adam’s too. On a track like Before the Landslide you’ll hear that slightly behind-the-beat Nick Mason feel, the Rick Wright-style organ, and space for Alex to soar. That Dark Side and Wish You Were Here period is a touchstone.”

The prog thread grows stronger on new material. One

in-progress co-write is “turning into a big Genesis-y, Pink Floyd-y, bluesy epic, about twelve minutes long,” Paul reveals. “It’s almost a life-story lyric.”

Voices around the mic

Another signpost for the future is the spread of lead vocals. “Alex sings the first song on the record and Adam takes a lead too. Nobody knew Adam sang,” Paul grins. “That’s where we’re headed.”

The Chloe Josephine factor

Backing vocalist Chloe Josephine, so impactful on Catfish’s posthumous Time to Fly, returns here. “Chloe doesn’t just sing parts, she brings ideas,” Paul says. “On Now More Than Ever and Rise Up she transformed sections. A little background idea of hers on Rise Up has become a big audience call-and-response moment live.”

Covers with a twist

Burning Rope’s approach to covers is to “turn them inside out.” A standout is their version of Tainted Love, closer to Gloria Jones than Soft Cell and slowed to a soulful churn, with a cheeky mid-section nod to Rage Against the Machine’s Killing in the Name. “If the audience recognises a cover from the first bar and you don’t do anything different, they know exactly what’s coming for four minutes,” Paul says. “We want to surprise them, out of love and respect for the originals.”

What comes next

There is already enough momentum for more. “We’ve demoed five tracks for the next release,” Paul confirms. “We’ll get this record out, then hit the studio in the new year. We plan to move quickly.”

A live album will likely follow after a couple of studio records. “The pictures seem to rule now,” Paul muses, “but a live set would let some covers and older songs see daylight.”

> ***“We plan to move quickly. 4 writers means we won’t be short of songs.”***

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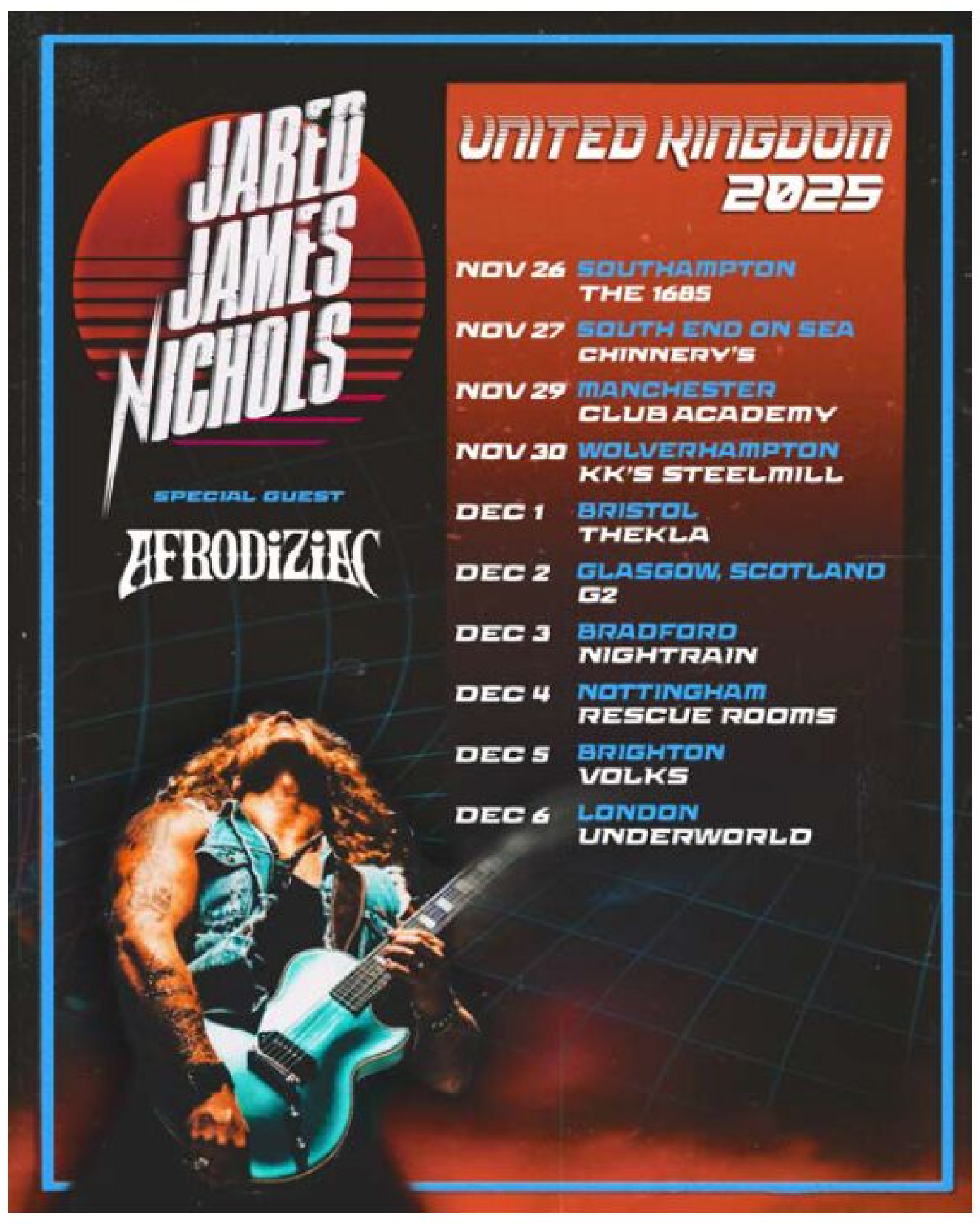

JARED JAMES NICHOLS

SPECIAL GUEST

AFRODIZIAC

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NOV 29 MANCHESTER CLUB ACADEMY
NOV 30 WOLVERHAMPTON KK'S STEELMILL
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DEC 2 GLASGOW, SCOTLAND G2
DEC 3 BRADFORD NIGHTRAIN
DEC 4 NOTTINGHAM RESCUE ROOMS
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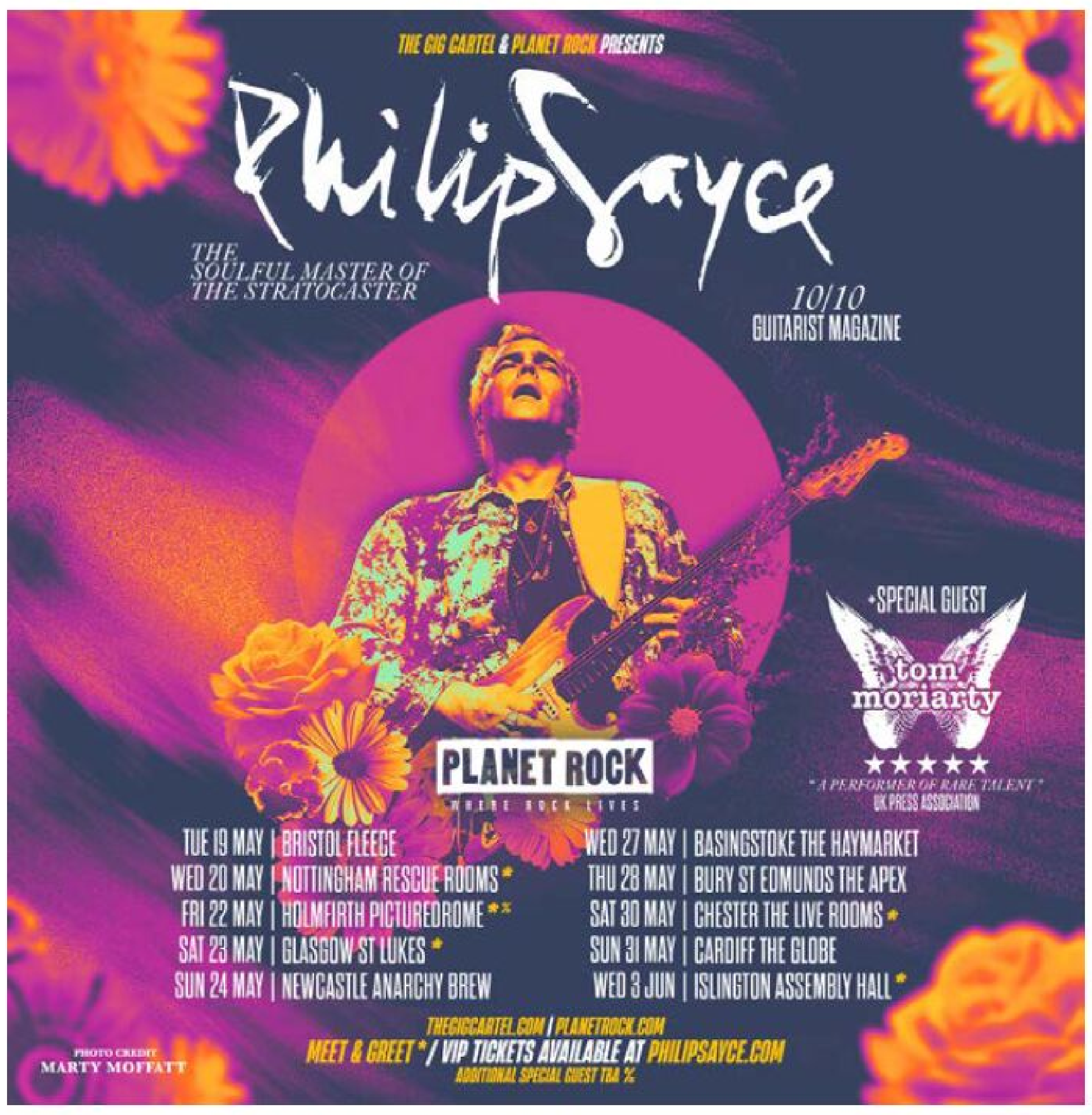

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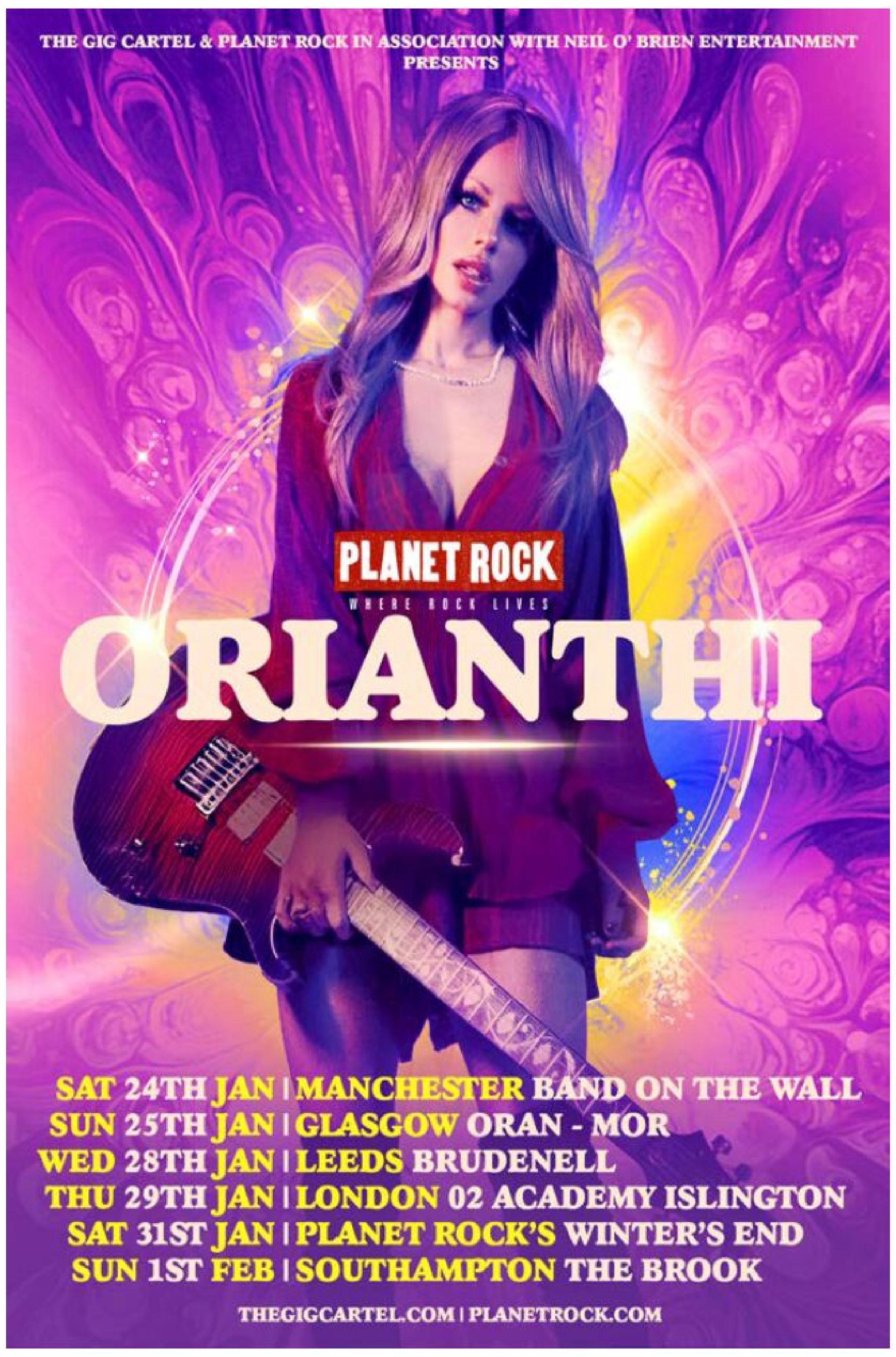

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25.10 GLOUCESTER GUILDHALL
26.10 NORWICH WATERFRONT STUDIO
29.10 GRIMSBY DOCKS ACADEMY
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31.10 BIRMINGHAM CASTLE & FALCON
01.11 STOCKTON GEORGIAN THEATRE
02.11 CARLISLE OLD FIRE STATION
04.11 GLASGOW ORAN MOR
05.11 EDINBURGH LA BELLE ANGELE
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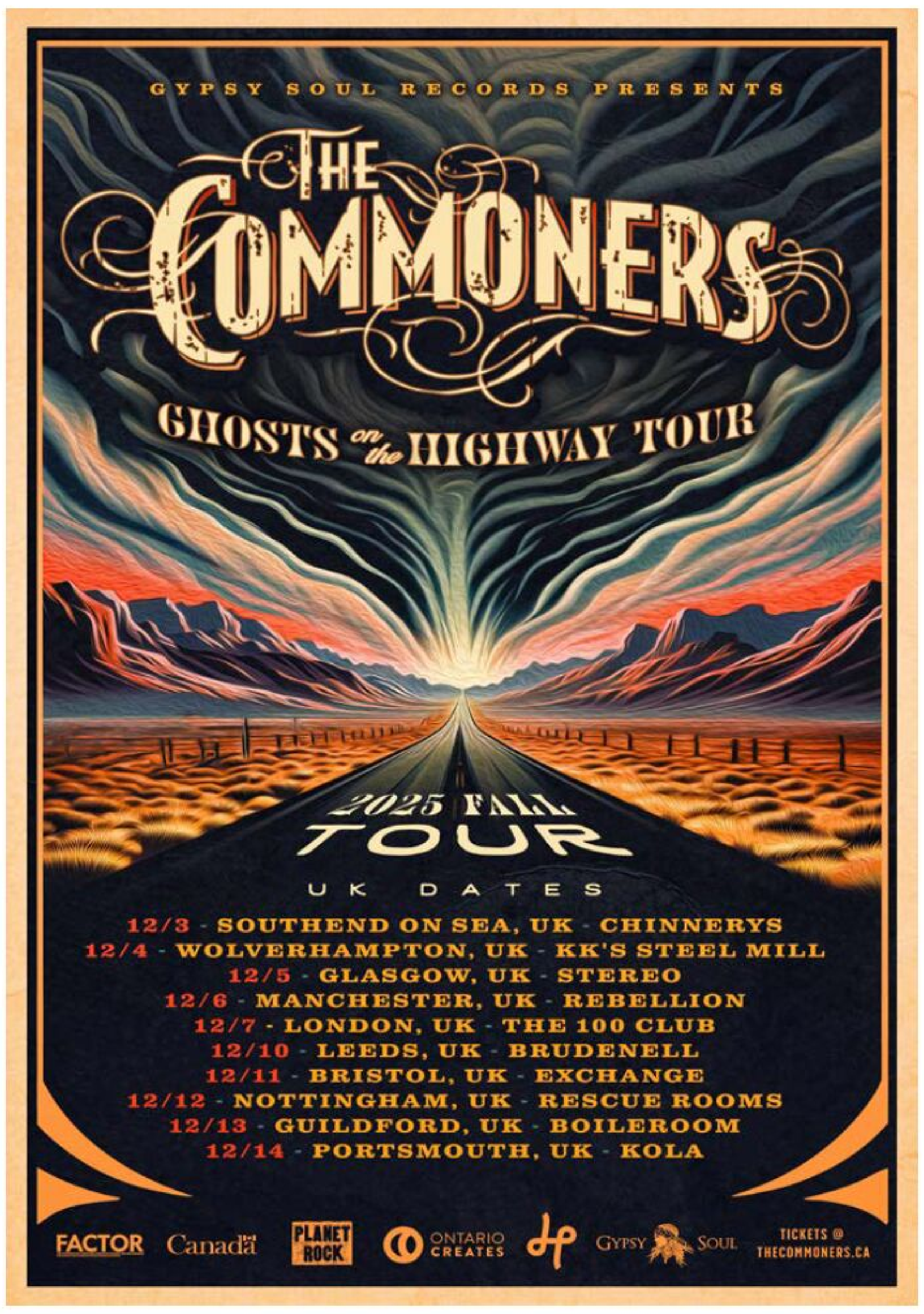

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#2	D.K. HARRELL	TALKIN' HEAVY	ALLIGATOR RECORDS
#3	MONSTER MIKE WELCH	KEEP LIVING TIL I DIE	SELF-RELEASE
#4	MARIA MULDAUR	ONE HOUR MAMA	NOLA BLUE
#5	THE BONESHAKERS	LIVE TO BE THIS	GULF COAST RECORDS
#6	LARRY MCCRAY	HEARTBREAK CITY	THE BLUES ALIVE
#7	CHARLIE MUSSELWHITE	LOOK OUT HIGHWAY	FORTY BELOW RECORDS
#8	DEVON ALLMAN	THE BLUES SUMMIT	RUF RECORDS
#9	CHAMBERS-DESLAURIERS	OUR TIME TO RIDE	FORTY BELOW
#10	CANDICE IVORY	NEW SOUTHERN VINTAGE	NOLA BLUE
#11	KIRK FLETCHER	KEEP ON PUSHING	VIZZTONE
#12	YATES MCKENDREE	NEED TO KNOW	QUALIFIED
#13	TAJ MAHAL & KEB' MO'	ROOM ON THE PORCH	CONCORD
#14	KENT BURNSIDE	HILL COUNTRY BLOOD	STROLLING BONES
#15	BOBBY RUSH & KENNY WAYNE SHEPHERD	YOUNG FASHIONED WAYS	DEEP RUSH RECORDS
#16	GARRY BURNSIDE	IT'S MY TIME NOW	STROLLING BONES
#17	RORY BLOCK	HEAVY ON THE BLUES	M.C. RECORDS
#18	MIKE FARRIS	THE SOUND OF MUSCLE SHOALS	FAME ENTERPRISES
#19	MOTHER BLUES WITH GERALD MCCLENDON	SLEEPING WHILE THE RIVER RUNS	SLEEPING DOG
#20	JOHN PRIMER	GROWN IN MISSISSIPPI	BLUES HOUSE
#21	MIKE HENDERSON	LAST NITE AT THE BLUEBIRD LIVE	QUALIFIED
#22	THE ALEXIS P. SUTER BAND	JUST STAY HIGH	BIG MAMA
#23	CAROLYN WONDERLAND	TRUTH IS	ALLIGATOR
#24	THE BLUESMASTERS	THE BLUESMASTERS	EXULANS
#25	JIMI 'PRIME TIME' SMITH	IT'S MY TIME	NEW FOLK
#26	BIG SHOES	KING SIZE	QUALIFIED
#27	TAD ROBINSON	SOUL IN BLUE	DELMARK
#28	DAVE SPECTER	LIVE AT SPACE	DELMARK
#29	SOUTHERN AVENUE	FAMILY	ALLIGATOR
#30	TOMMY CASTRO	CLOSER TO THE BONE	ALLIGATOR
#31	KIP LONDON	THE LAST DANCE	MOMOJO RECORDS
#32	BRANDON SANTINI	WHICH WAY DO WE GO?	MOMOJO RECORDS
#33	THE NAME DROPPERS	COOL BLUE SHOES	HORIZON
#34	MIKEY JUNIOR	TRIBUTE TO SONNY BOY WILLIA...	8TH TRAIN RECORDS
#35	POPA CHUBBY	I LOVE FREDDIE KING	GULF COAST
#36	TERRY HANCK	GREASE TO GRAVY	LITTLE VILLAGE
#37	WILLIE BUCK & BOB CORRITORE	OH YEAH!	VIZZTONE SWMAF
#38	TOM HAMBRIDGE	DOWN THE HATCH	QUARTO VALLEY
#39	JANIVA MAGNESS	BACK FOR ME	BLUE ELAN
#40	LISA MANN'S NORTHWESTERN ALL-STARS	THE GREAT WOMEN IN BLUES	SELF-RELEASE
#41	JOHN CHRISTOPHER MORGAN	RIGHT ON TIME	SELF-RELEASE
#42	LONG TALL DEB & COLIN JOHN	LIGHT IT UP	VIZZTONE
#43	ALLY VENABLE	MONEY & POWER	RUF RECORDS
#44	CHRIS VINCENT & THE RAW DEALS	GOOD CROOK	S R
#45	THE KERRY KEARNEY BAND	THE KERRY KEARNEY BAND	PARADIDDLE RECORDS 2025
#46	ERIC GALES	A TRIBUTE TO LJK	PROVOGUE
#47	SAMANTHA FISH	PAPER DOLL	ROUNDER RECORDS
#48	JOE BONAMASSA	BREAKTHROUGH	J&R ADVENTURES
#49	DEBBIE BOND	LIVE AT THE SONG THEATER	BLUES ROOT
#50	DOUG MACLEOD	BETWEEN SOMEWHERE & GOODB...	REFERENCE RECORDINGS

THE GHOSTS OF THE HIGHWAY ARE COMING
THE COMMONERS UK TOUR

Canadian blues rockers The Commoners are coming to the UK in December as part of their Ghosts Of The Highway tour. The band have become regular visitors to these shores and are continuing to build a solid and loyal fanbase based around their pulsating live shows and heavy rotation on Planet Rock.

Steve Yourglivch Paul Wright

They recently released a live album entitled Live In The UK that captures brilliantly the power of their performances and is a good guide for any music lovers who haven't yet picked up on this happening band.

TALKING WITH ROSS HAYES CITRULLO

I recently had the opportunity to link up with guitarist Ross Hayes Citrullo, who is also a renowned producer not only for The Commoners but also for bands such as The Sheepdogs and Monster Truck. I wanted to ask him about the live album and what we can expect from the forthcoming tour.

"We put it out right before the last summer tour. We've been touring it around and basically, we've done two tours with it and it's been a big success. I think it's mostly from one show, right towards the end of our UK tour with the Sheepdogs, or at least the UK leg of the Sheepdogs tour and it's mostly one show but it's a couple so we wanted to sort of keep it ambiguous as to which one it was because it is parts of two shows but it's really the last couple of shows from that tour so you can kind of do the math on which one it is. Yeah. But yeah, we kind of left it ambiguous. It was sort of like, I mean, we took, you know, one part from this one, and a part from this one. But I mean, basically it was, you know, I would say 90% from the one show. And it was, you know, everybody was sort of firing on all cylinders. We had been touring for a month. So, it kind of made sense that it was, everybody was playing themselves, so we just rolled on it and it worked. So, everything was kind of road worn, as it were, and together and ready."

I told Ross that one of the most enjoyable aspects of the album for me was the fact it wasn't overblown like lots of live albums can be sometimes. It's like 50 minutes, nothing is on there that doesn't need to be.

"I think a lot of the albums that I love, for a live album, are usually double discs. The Song Remains The Same, The Black Crowes with Jimmy Page. Even Frampton Comes Alive, I think, with a double album, right. So with us, because we've been sort of the perfect opening band for a lot of acts in the last couple of years, Sam Fish and Jesse Dayton, The Sheepdogs, and these guys, it's like we've perfected our 50-to-an-hour set, right? And that's what we wanted to showcase to people, that we've got this very succinct, here's all of our hits kind of record, right? And it happens to be a perfect live album because it's not that long. Actually, the running order on the CD and the vinyl are different, which is funny because we did that, at the last minute, we did it just because the run time of vinyl always has to be a specific amount for sound quality. So, we kind of always said, well, what's the best way to get both sides so we don't have to cut anything? And we still ended up cutting a song, but what was the best way to keep it so that it still flowed? So, the order is a little different. We do the acoustic numbers on side A, and then side B is all the heavy stuff. So it's kind of neat that it works both ways, which is kind of cool. And it just sort of shows that you could change the set order around live, and it would be okay. And that was a really cool moment, you know."

PREPARING FOR HEADLINE SHOWS

The December dates are mostly the band headlining their own shows, so I wondered how differently that meant the guys would approach them.

"Yeah, that was going to be sort of our giving back tour where we come back with a full headlining set, you know. And we've headlined a few shows in the UK in the last tour, but, like, a lot of them were festivals. I think we're going to be doing 90s with encores, so it'll be a nice... but we always have this internal debate about the encore situation or the runtime. Some of my favourite bands I've seen play live, and sometimes it's too much. I went to see Blackberry Smoke, who I love, after they cancelled their show three or four times because of the pandemic. And they showed up, they're like, well, we're going to make it up to you, which was amazing. But by the second hour, it was like, I kind of want to go home, even though I love the band. Even that was like, it's too much. So, we have that internal discussion a lot about like what is the proper length or even a headlining show like when do you leave people still wanting more but absolutely satisfied so like that's what we don't know. A lot of bands don't even do an encore these days that's another thing that's kind of interesting, a lot of bands just say we're playing our 90 and then we're leaving because we've played as much as we feel we want. It's not a disrespectful thing it's just an interesting debate isn't it. You know we try to play what everybody wants, especially in the UK, the stuff that's made it onto Planet Rock. I think we had seven singles from the last two records that were like on regular rotation and some of them were up there for double digit weeks which is kind of amazing for a new band so like those are ones that we have to play those."

Absolutely that's what people come along and expect and I guess as well if you're going to be headlining your own tour and you're going to be doing a 90-minute set, some of those songs, maybe the quieter songs, you need enough space to play that, because you can't play that and then go into something super heavy straight after. You need to kind of play that and then build the tempo up again, don't you.

"It's going to be like an arc, right. Zeppelin was a big favourite of mine growing up, and I loved it when they would do the acoustic songs, they would sort of make almost a set break, and then they would go into this, here's our acoustic sets, and they'd do all the acoustic numbers. And Rival Sons used to do stuff like that. I love them. They used to do things like that. When I first sort of stumbled on them in the middle of their Great Western Valkyrie record, and they were playing around Toronto, and you can see that they were doing a similar thing. They would break down in the middle and do the acoustic drum kit and it was like, okay, that's how you do it. I love doing that."

CANADIAN VS UK MUSIC SCENES

I asked Ross if he felt there were any differences in the Canadian and UK music scenes, especially for bands like The Commoners.

"Canada's music scene is tougher because it's more dominated by dance or pop-centric music. As a producer, I tell other bands they have to go to the UK and EU where they appreciate rock music. In Canada, to get success and play festivals, you have to fit into the 'roots,' 'blues,' or 'folk' categories. You can't just be a straight-up rock band. The Sheepdogs are an exception; they have dominated Canada but are still trying to achieve that same level of success in the UK."

SOUTHERN ROCK INFLUENCES

I feel with The Commoners and some of the bands you've mentioned there's quite a lot of Southern Rock elements in there.

"Exactly I think that's what we've always tried to do was Southern Rock, it doesn't mean that was the genre class because I think we technically we're a roots rock band because you do have the rootsier elements but I think you know it's a rock show and it has Southern elements and I think that's really what we do and to fit in with the Canadian scene you'll have to put that Roots label in especially if you are playing close to that world because most of the festivals here are roots festivals or folk festivals, and like a lot of the bands in our genre, unless you're a hard rock band you really have to live in this world where you're sort of blues, you're sort of roots and you're sort of rock, in order to be able to get success here. Which I think is why a lot of bands aren't having. You really can't just be a straight up rock band and do well over here so I think that's why you see a lot of the root elements making their way in."

Toronto is a long way from the origins of Southern rock but singer Chris Medhurst certainly has that Southern rock vocal thing going on. He has a very soulful expressive range.

THE COMMONERS
LIVE IN THE UK

"Yeah, I mean, he sort of figured out how to live in the middle ground there. I mean, he's not, you know, he doesn't, if you listen to him talk, he's not a very high talker, right? Like, if you listen to Chris Robinson or, you know, even Robert Plant, like, they both have, they have much higher voices when they talk, right? It's way up there, but whereas Chris has got this deep voice, when he's singing, he's able to do the high stuff because his range is so good, but he's able to get that little bit of, you know, bottom end into it which a lot of the other guys didn't have, which I think kind of makes it seem a little more Southern. I think that's kind of like Charlie Starr in Blackberry Smoke, he kind of does that, too, he's got a low voice."

I mentioned to Ross how, on the live version of Restless, Chris's vocal reminded me of prime time Skynyrd.

"Big time. I mean, and that's a song that's actually a great example of his vocal range because he can go, you know, low to big to small and also small to big. And I think he sings a lot more comfortably when he's got an acoustic guitar in that range for whatever reason, you know, it's in B and it's kind of right where his vocal is. And so, like, when we do the heavier stuff, like, he does have to push to get up there. But, I mean, when he does, to me, something like Devil Teasin' Me, that's a magic moment for me. Whenever we hit that chorus in that song, I feel like we're at lift off there, you know. Usually, it comes at the end of the set, too, which is why I always kind of feel like it's a good moment at the end after you've kind of got through all the craziness. It's like, all right, this is where it pays off, you know."

WRITING THE NEXT ALBUM

With the band being so busy performing live these days I wondered if work had started on the next studio album.

"Yeah, I mean, the band's always sort of writing, but right after the last album, we had the live album out and went, all right, people are digging that too, we need new material, so everybody's writing, and you bring it to the group and you see. But because we are playing all the while, even through the Summer we played a few Canadian gigs, it's been tough to get a new record ready to go but there's stuff that's coming which I think a lot of it is good material I think it'll fit right in and it's supposed to be the same kind of direction everybody should be expecting but it'll have evolutions in it which I think is what it should be. Whereas you know like Zeppelin III, when on their third record they did a 180-degree change, they were going very acoustic, heavy mandolins and all these things and then a lot of the critics always were, that's interesting but then that's one of the best records that they have."

So, I was going to ask you about how it works in the studio. Do you and Chris get together with ideas? Pre-studio, I mean, I'm making a big assumption that Chris probably has a big say in the lyrics.

"Yeah, I mean, he doesn't write all the lyrics, but he certainly writes the majority of them. You know, a lot of the time, the way that it works is someone will bring in an idea, and then the band will sort of take that idea and try to formulate it into something that makes sense. I think the best songs we've written were the ones where it was like, there's an idea, whether it's a riff or a chorus, or whatever, and then we form the song around it as the five of us, and we actually are in the room working together and coming up with what that song is. That's what I've always thought was the formula for our success in writing songs. But sometimes Ben will bring in a song that's already written, and then we'll turn it into one of ours. Or sometimes I'll have a riff and a completed structure, and then... Yeah. I don't know. And then Chris will put the vocals on that, or Adam will have an idea, and then we'll sort of refine it that way. But usually it's rarely a full-pictured song. It's usually like you have six pieces and you put it together. So again, we try to do all that before we hit the studio, right? And I think the biggest thing that I always try to do with even my production clients here in Toronto, pre-production is the most important thing. You workshop the song in its entirety before you go into the studio. And it shouldn't even be trying to record it professionally until you've got the song completed. And then as you get a completed song into the studio, then it changes again. And that's the part where you're taking an 8 to a 10, as opposed to starting with a song that's a 4 in the studio trying to get it to a 10. It's like you're probably going to get it to a 7. It's not going to be great, so you've got to get it there first. And then you work in the studio to do it right. But like again the Rival Sons are a great example of how they didn't do that so yeah and this works for us it's worked for me over the years and I like that process but it doesn't mean that that's the only way just that tends to work for us it."

The Commoners tour the UK from December 3 – 14th. Tickets available from https://thecommoners.ca. New album "The Commoners – Live in the UK" is out now.

EXPLORE

THE ZAC SHULZE GANG

STRAIGHT TO THE TOP

The Zac Schulze Gang released their debut album Straight to It on September 26, 2025, via Ruf Records. Straight To It is a fitting title for the Zac Schulze Gang's first studio album: the trio doesn't mess around with niceties, preferring to play the kind of blues-infused rock'n'roll that grabs your throat and doesn't let go.

Adam Kennedy   Supplied

Reflecting on the year so far, Zac said: "We've done some great shows. We've done a lot of gigs this year, including many in Europe. I guess we've used this year as a year to play really, and getting the album and all that stuff together - that took a bit of time. The stresses that come with that, as well, everyone knows. But that's finally all coming together. So, yeah, it's been a great year. I've had a lot of fun."

The band recently made headlines when they announced their signing to prestigious German blues label Ruf Records. But how did the opportunity come about? "We're working with Rueben Williams and his team, who's managing Samantha Fish, Devon Allman, etc. And he's been working with Ruf, I think, the past 20, 30 years," explains Zac. "We'd already recorded the album, it was ready to go. And Rueben managed to secure a deal for us with Ruf. And it kind of makes sense, because we're doing a lot in Europe anyway. So, it kind of makes sense to have a European label."

The band has witnessed a lot of success in mainland Europe. "I say this a lot, but thanks to the Ballyshannon festival, so many people travel to that festival. So, that's really helped us out. And we've been lucky enough to play in quite a few places in Germany. And they've all been great clubs and great audiences. We do a lot more in the Netherlands than we do anywhere else. The Netherlands is really where we're playing a lot at the moment."

Ballyshannon is, of course, synonymous with Rory Gallagher. A guitar great with whom Zac has received frequent comparisons, along with Dr Feelgood's Wilko Johnson. But who would the guitarist say has influenced his playing the most? "Definitely, Rory, I'd say. Rory, probably in the later years, in the last sort of three, four years, Rory," confirms Zac. "I love Wilko's playing, and I love the first Feelgood albums. But I also love the Gypie Mayo era of Feelgood. Wilko was doing stuff that no one had ever done before. I'm inspired by Mick Green and stuff from the Pirates - another great band I love."

In that respect, the group are channelling the pub rock sounds of yore. "I think definitely when we're playing live, 100%. I mean, there is some of that on the album, for sure, that's just sort of hard-hitting, blues rock," said Zac. "The pub scene, Dr Feelgood and the Blockheads - what a time to be in London, South London, around that area. And all these bands coming out and playing pubs and clubs, that's kind of where we started. And we still play pubs and clubs back home. So, that scene is definitely very close to our hearts."

The band has been fortunate enough to tour the US in recent times, which is, of course, a huge market to crack. But what's the feedback been like Stateside so far? "It was absolutely mental. We went down really well. We

had the time of our lives for about a month and a half over there when we toured last year. At first, I guess we didn't really know what to expect. But by the first or first couple of shows, we're like, okay, this is working. We've got plans to go back there in September next year. So, we are looking forward to that," confirms Zac.

The gang's recent single High Roller was inspired by a pit stop in Las Vegas. "We were in Vegas when we were touring with Sam Fish, and we had a day off," recalls Zac. "We were in a hotel and stayed at a casino. We lost a load of money, that's what the song's about."

On the touring front, the group will be hitting the road extensively across the UK in support of their debut album. But how much are the group looking forward to touring back home? "The last one we did, I think it was April, was great. It was really good and sort of exceeded my expectations of what I thought it was going to be like," he said. "I'm really looking forward to it. And it's nice that we're working with Pete Sanger who's our UK agent, who's doing great because we kind of do these tours and then we'll have a London show, then do another tour, then do another London show. It's kind of working quite nicely for us. And we're able to sort of do those tours and knock out a lot of groundwork in the UK and then go off to Europe for a while and then come back and do the same thing. So, it's working really well. I'm really looking forward to it."

Since the band have had their debut album in the bag for a while, they are already thinking about what comes next. "We've already written a few for the next record. We'll probably get into the studio, I'm guessing around Jan-

THE QUEEN CHARLO
Queen Charlotte
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Live Music

uary, February, to start cutting that. So, then I expect it to be out sort of either mid, late 2026," explains Zac. "It's hard to tell because we're so busy on the road, trying to find the time to be as creative - it can be difficult. So, when we're back home, it's just about knuckling it down and cracking on with it. So, we've started bringing out interfaces with us on the road so we can kind of demo some stuff on the road. So hopefully that will speed up the process as well."

As we hurtle towards the end of 2025, the group are already thinking about the new year. Zac concludes: "There's going to be some announcements in the next couple of weeks about some tours next year. It's going to be a big year next year. It's going to be manic. There's going to be a lot of gigs, which is great. I'm looking forward to it. I think we've got about a week off in January, and then we'll hit the ground running and take it from there. So, yeah, just full steam ahead, really."

RIVERS TIDES

EXPLORE

DAVID SINCLAIR FOUR

HIPPIES
USE

THE JOURNEY TO THE RIGHT MUSIC

Andy Hughes

Supplied

David Sinclair has been busy over the last few years, developing and expanding the reputation for his Blues-rock band The David Sinclair Four, who ply their trade around the Blues clubs and similar venues around London and The Home Counties.

David has enjoyed a varied musical career, and he has enjoyed the prestige of being the ‘rock and pop’ critic, (as they were rather quaintly named back in the early days) of The Times newspaper. David explains his start in the world of music.

“I have had something of a strange and chequered career. I started out as a drummer, back in the day. I played in TV Smith’s Explorers, a band that came out of The Adverts, back in the punk era. We were signed to CBS, back in the time when a band could get a decent amount of money by signing a contract with a record label, they invested in your future, such as it was. So that was my first experience as a musician, apart from playing in bands at school as most people do. That was my first proper band. Not long after that I joined a Blues band called Laughing Sam’s Dice, and we played around the usual London gigs, the Greyhound, the Marquee and so on. “

> **“you eventually find the music that is for you”**

“At that time, I started writing for some technical magazines, and for Record Mirror. I did some more material for Kerrang!, and Guitar Heroes, and then I got a job as the Rock and Pop correspondent for The Times. It was obviously a ticket to another level as a journalist, so I more or less stopped being a musician, and worked as a music journalist. I found my way back into music by becoming a songwriter. It was a sideline to go with journalism. I started writing songs and recording them as the guitarist and singer. I got a deal to get my first album of my songs with Proper Records, who I am still signed with, and I’ve now released six albums, and played a lot of gigs, and built it up, to the point where I feel that I am more of a serious musician than a serious journalist. I still do some journalism, but it’s not as full-on as it was when I was writing for The Times.”

As anyone who plays at all in public, it’s a busy world out there, nowhere more so than our own particular musical Eden, the world of Blues music, which is hugely populated with massively talented bands and solo musicians. So how do you go about developing a reputation, and a ‘name’ that will bring out the wonderful public to hear you sing and play? David has some views on that. “It’s really a matter of playing as many gigs as you can and just getting yourself out there and seen and heard by people. It’s been something of an open-ended journey for me really, I didn’t start out with the intention of being a Blues musician as such, I was more of a songwriter, which I still am really. I think my background in the Blues ran deeper than I realised. My introduction to Blues came when I heard the ‘Beano’ album from John Mayall with Eric Clapton.”

“I was part of the second generation of Blues fans, following on from the original British Blues fans who studied all the works of the original American Blues musicians. They were recycling and updating that style of music. I can’t claim to be a student of the original Blues players, although I have seen most of them, and interviewed quite a lot of them. I interviewed BB King, and saw John Lee Hooker, so I did get to see those players. But my real introduction was Eric Clapton, and then knowing Laurie Garman, the harmonica player who is absolutely steeped in the history of the Blues and can play everything, and has played with these major musicians through the ‘60’s and ‘70’s. I can’t claim to have done that myself, so when I started, I was just a songwriter, and my songs were not especially Blues songs. When I started my band, the David Sinclair Four, I started it with a guitarist named Geoff Peel, who is an absolute student of the Clapton era of sixties Blues. He is a wonderful player, and he took me under his wing in a way, and he introduced me to a lot of things, along with Laurie Garman, I think you eventually find the music that is for you after you have made after a number of diversions along the way. And you have to find your tribe, the people who enjoy what you enjoy, and are going to be your audience.”

“There is to an extent a commercial necessity to get people to come along and hear your music. It sounds like an odd thing to say, because the Blues is very much a minority genre, and was never part of the mainstream, but I have gravitated towards it because this is where my heart lies. These are the clubs and venues where I love to be. We play Blues clubs and venues, and we’ve been very well accepted in them. Places like Dusty’s in High Wycombe, we’ve played there half a dozen times and it’s always been brilliant. The other day we played at the Surrey Blues Club in Hersham, and that was great as well. It feels like that was where I was headed all the time. That’s not to say that I am in the same area as some of the musicians who feature in Blues Matters. It’s hard to say. What is ‘Blues’ these days? I think of Blues as a living tradition, and I want to contribute to that and not simply rehash old songs and churn them out in a fake American accent! It’s about writing new songs and getting them out there.”

Is the David Sinclair Four your first band as a professional

artist? "It is insofar as it's the first time I got a record deal, and label support for my music. We started in 2013, and issued our first album in 2015. It's getting increasingly hard to get that support, to find you can make a record properly, and get it released and distributed. My first album, which was with Geoff Peel, that was a big moment, yeah.

"It's weird, I interviewed Holly Golightly, the garage rock artist who sings with Thee Headcoatees, and she is on the White Stipes' Elephant album, she's released over twenty-five albums. I asked her why the delay in her latest release, and she told me she has a day job, and she only sees music as a hobby! These days, you have to keep body and soul together, and you do the best you can, you do as many records and play as many gigs as you can, and it is a real struggle."

Because David does regard himself primarily as a songwriter, it makes sense to drill down into his inspirations as a writer, and that reveals a fascinating story. "I have a song called Life's Gone Cold, where I imagined myself being Peter Green. I have been reading a lot about him, and his rather tragic life, he was a massively talented guy and it went badly wrong for him in so many ways. So, I decided to write a song as though I was Peter Green, about a guy whose life has fallen apart, and who faces this bleak future.

"It's written in the style of Peter Green, and it always goes down really well at gigs. But people seem to think it is about me. One guy suggested to me that I ought to

think about getting some therapy! The song is about a guy whose life has fallen apart, and his marriage has broken up. It's not about me, I am happily married and I've had a charmed life, I can't claim that anything has gone wrong for me to that extent. But other songs are extremely personal. We have a new single out called I'm Waiting. It's an upbeat song, and I hope it puts a smile on people's faces. The idea came when I was trying to get an appointment with my doctor, and I'm stuck holding the phone in this queue, and it's telling me that my call is important, but I'm still stuck in the queue, so the song is all about waiting. You can do miracles on your phone these days, but if you want to get an appointment with your doctor, or get some information about train times, good luck!"

> **"I think of Blues as a living tradition"**

It's good to hear that The David Sinclair Four have a single out, and even better to hear that there is more to follow, as David confirms. "We have the single I'm Waiting out, and we have some other singles coming out in three-month intervals, we have one in December, and one in February next year, and then we are hoping to get another album out. It's very hard to make albums work these days. You must have momentum behind your material but everyone just listens to songs these days on the Internet, and for someone like me, it's hard to get an album to stand up. By the middle of next year, we should have an album out if things work out."

Looking into the future, how far ahead do you plan for the band David? "Around six months on average. And that's a rolling time scale. We have gigs through to February or March next year, and hopefully new gigs will follow on from there. It's rolling down the road, it kind of unfolds in front of you as you go. I go through phases, I do some writing, and then recording, and then gigging. We are in a releasing and gigging phase right now, and then I need to get some more writing done."

Well, we can all look forward to more music, live and on record. Keep your ears open, The Daid Sinclair Four are well worth a listen, and a watch.

EXPLORE

PLAYING IN A ROOMFUL OF BLUES

Andy Hughes   Michael Sparks & Sonja Lemoi

For the first time in their very long and equally illustrious career, jump blues and swing revival flag bearers Roomful of Blues are enjoying the considerable pleasure of hearing a woman singer take on their incendiary vocal lines as they continue to criss-cross the highways and byways of the USA. The highly rated DD Bastos is the artist in question, and she has embraced the challenge with delight.

The obvious first question for Blues Matters to put to DD Bastos of Roomful of Blues is how the collaboration came about...

"I've known the members of Roomful of Blues for a long time, because I was on the same scene with my own band, DD and The Road Kings," she recalls, her voice warm and resonant. "Some of their musicians even guested on my recordings. When I decided to make an album of blues from the 40s to the 60s, I thought, why not ask the very best? They were perfect. That record turned out wonderfully, and we had a great time making it. So when their singer fell ill and they needed someone quickly, I was already familiar with their style – and with original songs I could bring to the table. It felt like a family reunion. Honestly, I was tickled pink. I never could have dreamed this would happen, and it is such an honour to work with this band."

Had the band told her why they specifically chose her? "They needed someone who knew the genre and their material, and who had songs of their own. I fit the bill. They'd worked with Pat Benatar back in the 80s, when they fought tooth and nail with their label to release that album. For them, it's always been about getting the music out there – not about chasing money. That meant a lot to me."

Even for a seasoned performer, stepping into a role with a band so deeply rooted in blues history was daunting.

"There's a long list of singers who've fronted this band, so yes, the shoes to fill were big," she admits. "And Roomful is a horn band. When those horns kick in, it's like a locomotive – once it leaves the station, you'd better be on board. As the vocalist, you're the figurehead,

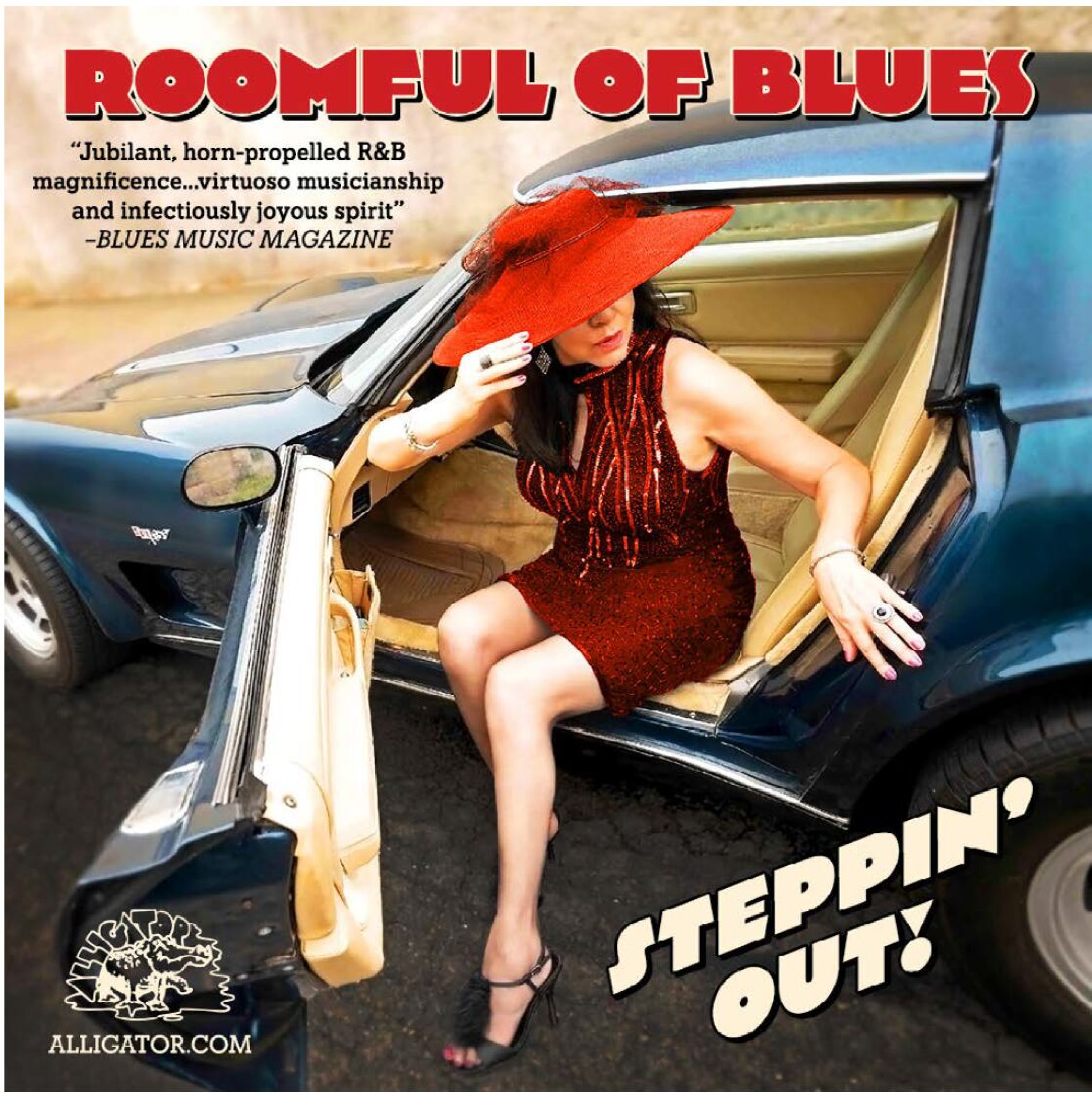
you're driving the show. I thought hard about whether I could be that person. But in the end, I had to trust in myself as much as they trusted me."

Her debut with the band was at the Spire Center in Plymouth, Massachusetts – familiar territory for the group, but entirely new ground for DD.

"That night was nerve-racking. I don't get nervous anymore, but this was different. Seven men, one woman – how would the crowd react? Would the band feel like a boys' club? But from the first note, it felt right. The audience gave us a standing ovation. Afterwards, I went to the front door to thank people personally, to hear what they thought. The response was overwhelmingly positive. People said they were surprised to see a woman step out in a sparkly dress, but they loved it. Some even asked when an album was coming. That's when we knew we had to make one. It's out October 10, and the first three hundred who pre-order will get signed copies."

Music has always been a constant thread in DD's life. "I grew up singing in church. I was five when I first sang publicly. Later, I joined choirs, learned classical choral music, and by high school I knew I wanted to be a professional singer. I even won a scholarship to study classical voice. Singing has never been something I shied away from – I've always loved it."

Touring life brings highs and lows in equal measure. "The best part is always the shows, and reconnecting with fans in places I've played before," DD explains. "I love seeing people respond to the band. But there are challenges. For me, food is one of them – I don't eat beef, pork, or chicken, and sometimes finding fresh fruit on the


ROOMFUL OF BLUES
"Jubilant, horn-propelled R&B magnificence...virtuoso musicianship and infectiously joyous spirit"
–BLUES MUSIC MAGAZINE
STEPPIN' OUT!
ALLIGATOR.COM

> **"I was getting to join a great band, and it felt fabulous."**

EXPLORE

road is surprisingly hard. Then there's the waiting around before shows. Sure, you can scroll social media, but that only goes so far. We often use the downtime to talk about the band's direction, which is productive, but I still find it hard to just nap or switch off before a gig."

So what's the one essential item she always packs for life on the road?

"My iPad," she laughs. "I could live without my phone, but not my iPad. I can stay in touch, play music, watch documentaries – it keeps me centred. Mental health is a big deal for me, and looking after myself means I can deliver the best for the fans. They deserve nothing less."

Joining Roomful of Blues is not just another chapter in DD Bastos' career – it is a defining moment. She has stepped into a legendary band's story with courage, confidence, and a voice that more than does justice to their rich repertoire.

BIG BLUES REVIEWS

Kirk Fletcher
Keep On Pushing

KIRK FLETCHER

KEEP ON PUSHING

Vizztone

Alongside a career as a sideman for Joe Bonamassa, Charlie Musselwhite, The Mannish Boys and The Fabulous Thunderbirds, Kirk Fletcher has been releasing solo albums since 1999. Keep On Pushing is his eighth and most accomplished to date. Recording began in 2023 but was interrupted when Kirk suffered a stroke on stage. After recovery and therapy, he returned to finish the record, determined to move forward. The album was co-produced with JD Simo, who also adds guitar, and recorded live in Nashville with Jason Smay (drums) and Ron Eoff (bass). That live approach gives the set its raw, natural energy. Seven of the ten tracks are covers, ranging from Percy Mayfield to Big Bill Broonzy and T-Bone Walker, all delivered with respect and fire. The opening cut, Ruth Brown's "It's Love Baby," sets a swinging tone, while "Just A Dream" features a standout vocal. Arthur Crudup's "I'm Gonna Dig Myself A Hole" charges along, and "Every Dog Has Its Day" adds a funkier edge. Other highlights include the title track, the instrumental "Croke," and T-Bone Walker's "Here In The Dark," a slow blues that showcases Fletcher's most emotive singing and playing. A couple more uptempo numbers might have varied the mood, but that consistency is also the album's strength. Cut in the old-school way - roll the tape and play - this record glows with Fletcher's affection for these songs. It is heartfelt, authentic and a reminder of why he is one of the most respected contemporary blues artists.

> *"It is heartfelt, authentic and a reminder of why he is one of the most respected contemporary blues artists"*

PAUL LONG

EXPLORE

ADAMA JANLO

A FREE WOMAN

Independent

The debut album from Adama Janlo, is a bold and compelling statement of identity. At once intimate and expansive, the record captures Janlo's artistic maturation, a journey from tentative self-inquiry to confident declaration. From the opening track, Come Over Here Janlo's voice seizes attention: textured, emotive, able to inhabit both fragility and strength without strain. Backed by production and mixing from Kim E. Bergseth, the sonic palette is rich with warm instrumentation, spacious arrangements, moments of sparseness that serve to amplify the lyrical weight of

MUD MORGANFIELD

DEEP MUD

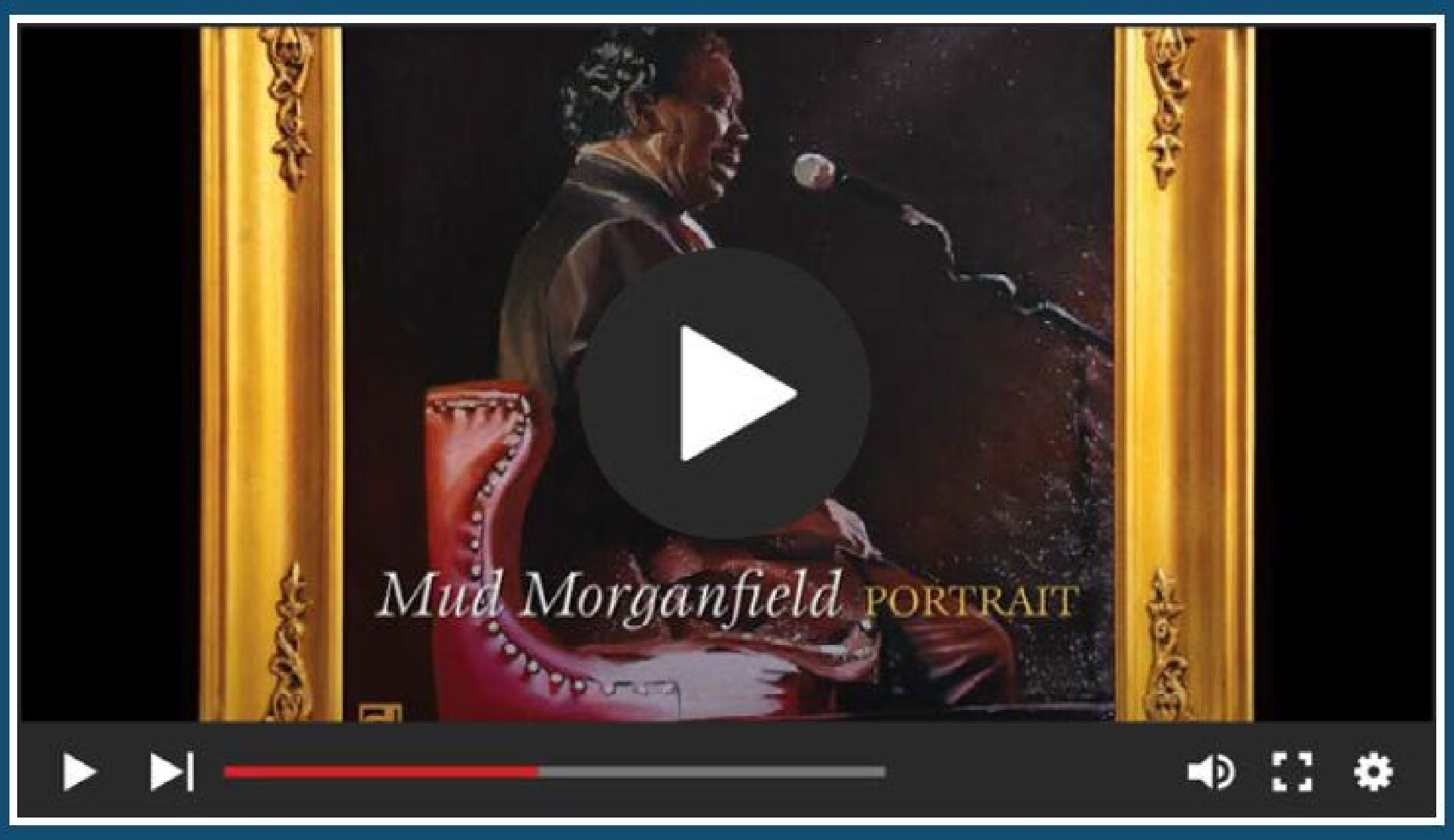
Nola Blue Records

DEEP MUD
MUD MORGANFIELD
NOLA BLUE RECORDS

Mud Morganfield's new album, Deep Mud, doesn't just tip its hat to legacy, it digs into it, reshaping his father's towering shadow into something raw and personal. As the eldest son of Muddy Waters, Morganfield has long carried a name that looms as large as the Chicago skyline. But this record isn't about leaning on that birthright; it's about carving his own groove in the city that raised him.

Cut at JoyRide Studios with harmonica stalwart Studebaker John in the producer's chair, Deep Mud is a 14-track set that bleeds authenticity. Twelve originals sit alongside fresh takes on Muddy's Country Boy and Willie Dixon's Strange Woman, but this isn't museum blues. Morganfield's gravel-edged vocals don't mimic but they testify. These songs, born out of a stormy chapter in his life, carry the grit of loss, the sting of love, and the resilience of a man still standing. Standouts like Strike Like Lightning crackle with urgency, while A Dream Walking, a tender nod to his mother, shows a softer shade of soul. He also leans into the tradition of storytelling blues, with tracks like Blame It On The Blues drawing sharp, lived-in sketches of hardship and survival. It's the balance between tough grooves and reflective moments that makes the record resonate beyond its Chicago roots.

> *pushing it forward, one electrifying show at a time*



Surrounding him is a killer Chicago lineup: Rick Kreher and Mike Wheeler weaving guitars with equal fire and finesse, Roosevelt "Mad Hatter" Purifoy and Sumito Ariyoshi painting with keys, E.G. McDaniel and Melvin "Pookie Styx" Carlisle nailing the rhythm, with Studebaker John and Phil Perkins bringing harp bite and horn muscle. In an era when blues often dilutes into rock gloss, Deep Mud stays true. For Morganfield, the blues isn't just heritage, it's lifeblood, and on this record, that blood runs deep.

COLIN CAMPBELL

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

albasile
blues in hand

AL BASILE

BLUES IN HAND

Sweetspot Records

Al Basile is back with a new release, a thirteen-track statement that marks his twenty-first outing on Sweetspot Records. Where last year's B's Time looked back across his career, this one looks inward, offering a set of all-new songs recorded in West Greenwich, Rhode Island, and given a clean, warm shine by trusted studio hands Jack Gauthier and Glenn Halverson. What jumps out right away is how personal this record feels. Basile has often spun stories through characters, but here the mask drops, these songs carry more of his own skin, his own voice. His cornet isn't just a sideline instrument, it's a co-narrator, a second voice that ties him back to the storytelling brass of Louis Armstrong. The band around him is a familiar and formidable crew, veterans of Duke Robillard's outfits and Roomful of Blues; tight, tasteful, and steeped in tradition. Together they build a sound that's both polished and lived-in, never slick, always grounded. From the opener, All Your Lies through to When You Lose Your Money, Basile works familiar blues ground but turns the soil with fresh emotion. Each cut feels like a page from a private journal, carried by his lyrical authority and steady narrative hand. It's a record that doesn't just echo blues traditions; it breathes new air into them. Blues In Hand isn't just another chapter in a long catalogue, it's Basile distilling himself, horn in hand, songs at the ready. A record that feels less like performance and more like conversation, a deep, soulful exchange with the listener.

> *a deep, soulful exchange with the listener*

AL BASILE
LAST HAND

COLIN CAMPBELL

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

Janlo's message. Lyrically, A Free Woman weaves themes of autonomy, survival, and transformation. Janlo does not shy away from the darker corners of loss, longing, the burden of expectation, but always frames them in terms of liberation. This is not simply catharsis, but resilience; her songwriting suggests that freedom is less a destination and more a practice, as shown on the wonderful, Faith In Your Heart. The best songs here are those that allow tension to linger where minor chords hang, where silence is nearly as important as the melody such as the infectious, Fix This and the bluesy gospel of Bloodline. The pacing is thoughtful; the sequencing allows the listener to breathe between revelations. Lots of music styles here; soul, blues, singer-songwriter traditions that Janlo pushes even further out, into more daring textures like the title tune a raw emotionally charged tune. This is an artist still discovering edges, learning how to expand them. Overall, A Free Woman is a powerful debut. It establishes Janlo not just as a singular voice, but as a woman unafraid to claim her space. For anyone interested in music that balances emotional honesty, strong vocal craft, and thoughtful production, this album delivers.

COLIN CAMPBELL

ALICE DI MICELE

REVERSE THE FLOW

Alice Otter Music

Alice Di Micele is an Americana artist based in Oregon whose passion is to create music that uplifts, transforms and heals with her folk based music that contains touches of jazz, country, soul and blues. She is joined by her aptly named band Force Of Nature and opening song I Wanna Love is a warm anthem that celebrates loving our own bodies. Her vocals are rich, deep and expressive and her core band of Andy Casad (guitar), Rob Kohler (bass), and Nick Kirby (drums) are augmented by various guests adding organ, piano, violin, viola and cello. One Little Word is a sensitive, pretty, string driven ballad, demanding love and kind thoughts in the face of oppression and homophobia. Falling Through The Cracks is a funky number addressing homelessness and mental illness and people who are failed by the system. The Mystery is a beautiful, ethereal love song which features cello and angelic backing vocals. Springtime (Here We Go) is an upbeat, joyous celebration of the time the earth comes alive. The songs are excellent and feature stunning and powerful, wide ranging vocals and superb backing that entertains and also informs. Oh Humanity laments war and human suffering but also reminds us that "flowers bloom and bees make honey" and "kindness helps our children grow". Bonafide is a sumptuous soul-ballad celebrating loved ones who help to ease the pain in troubled times. The spectre of a murderous past inhabits the eerie song The Ghost Of Alice which is punctuated by jagged violin swoops from Darol Anger. We close with title track Reverse The Flow which asks us to keep fighting and working towards justice and reminds us "we're still here on this sacred ground" and "nobody can take that from us". Always full of interest and carrying important messages but always thoroughly enjoyable.

DAVE DRURY

BB AND THE BULLETS

HIGH TIDE

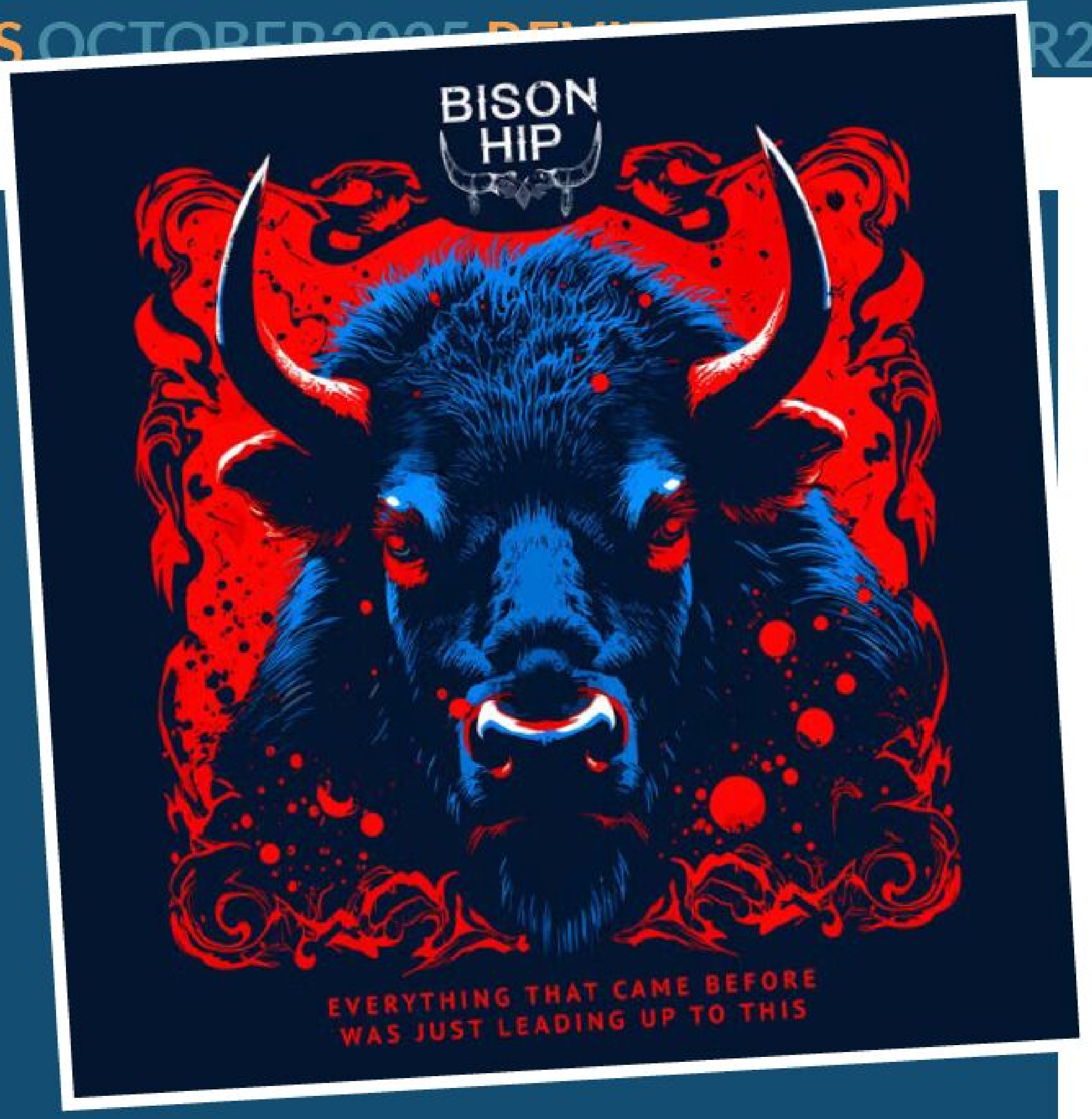
Nixon Street Recording/ DixieFrog

Blues from New Zealand does not come along very often in the northern hemisphere and that might just be our loss based on the evidence of this release from this trio. Under the leadership of singer, guitarist and producer Brian Baker (who has also worked frequently in a solo setting, but that's definitely not the case here), and with a subtly powerhouse rhythm section of Stu Duncan on bass and vocals and drummer/ backing vocalist Brad McMillan, they focus on blues and 60s R'n'B, with covers of material such as Albert King's Born Under A Bad Sign, Rufus Thomas' Walking The Dog (a very popular number to cover back in the 60s beat boom, and here taken a little faster than usual), the early 60s sound of I Can Tell –

BISON HIP

EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE WAS JUST LEADING UP TO THIS

Independent


BISON HIP
EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE WAS JUST LEADING UP TO THIS

Bison Hip's new album lands with a title heavy enough to sit alongside history, and this Glasgow outfit wears it well. Though formed in 2020, the five-piece plays with the poise and grit of road-seasoned veterans, their sound steeped in the blues but never chained by it. From the opening title track, they set a smoky tone: a moody, jazz-tinged shuffle where vocalist Paul Sloway handles a demanding chorus with effortless weight, while guitarist John Gilmour Smith drops in licks that sting, capped with a brief but fiery solo. That sense of chemistry runs deep. Bedlam struts on Malcolm Button's funky drums, sparked by Steven Radziwonik's bright piano lines, while Chemicals keeps it cheeky with a groove that's impossible to shake. The reflective Why Should I Cry If You Leave Me? slides into slow-burn blues territory, anchored by Carswell's bass and Button's subtle drive. The band then loosen their collar, raising dust on, Outrageous, tossing reggae spice into It's Cool, and tipping a hat to Bo Diddley with the rattling tune, Mountain.But it's The Imposter that cuts to the bone. At seven minutes, it's the album's heart; an aching ballad where Smith and Radziwonik trade stirring solos over a bed of vulnerability. From there, the ride swerves through the funky muscle of Defenceless before closing on gospel-tinged reflections with I Forgot To Tell My Heart That You Were Gone. Bison Hip may have arrived late, but with this record, they sound timeless, blues disciples with their own hard-earned voice.

> *blues disciples with their own hard-earned voice*

BISON HIP
BISON HIP

COLIN CAMPBELL

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

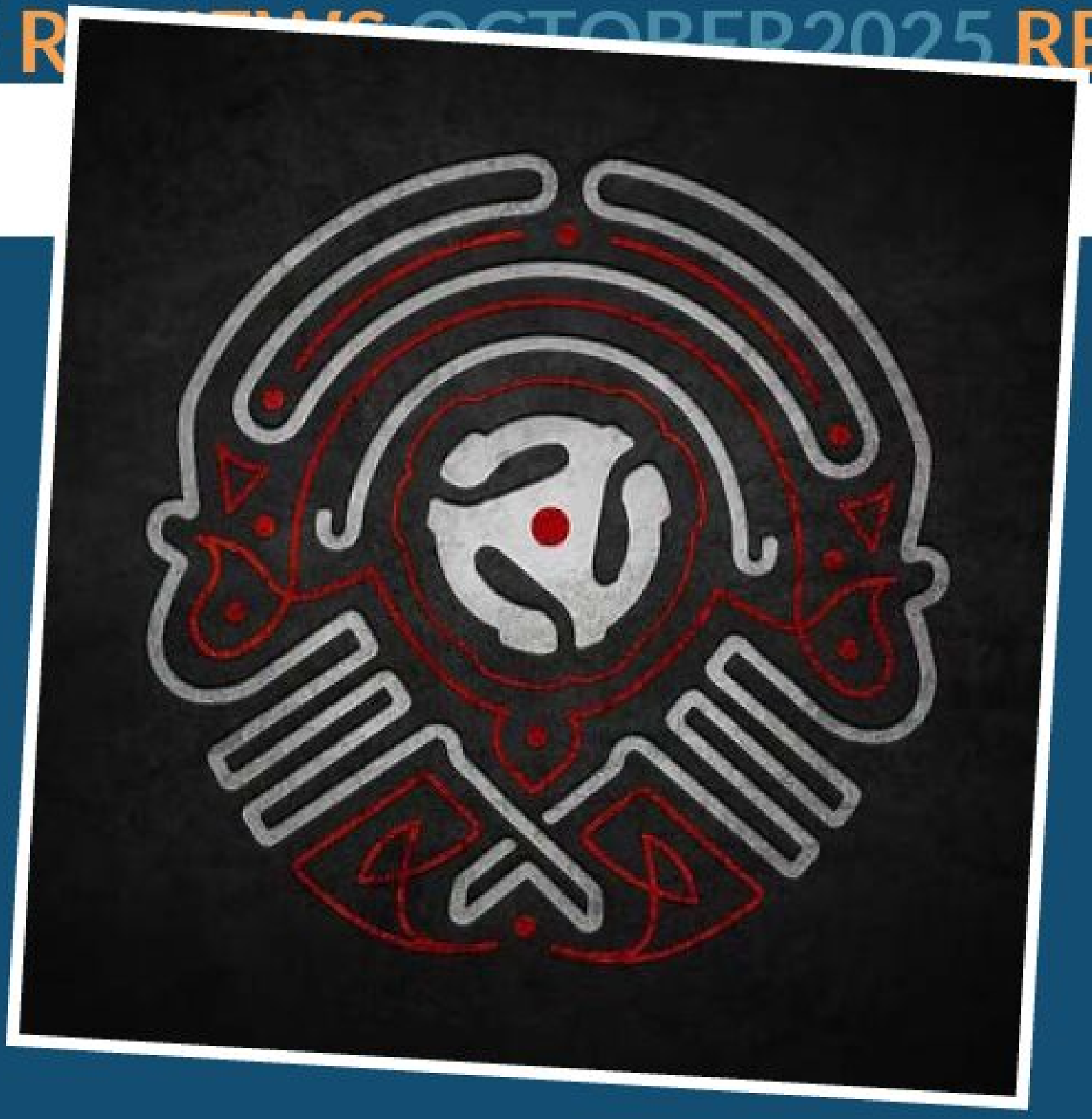
probably via Bo Diddley - and The Thrill Is Gone, best-known of course from BB King's hit version. Baker's originals also mostly keep the blues approach, though stretching it just a little maybe – try Seven Ways To Sin, Letting Go, or Brian's Boogie (Hurry Home) the latter a strong, largely up-tempo instrumental showcase for the leader. The opener, Something In The Water, races out of the traps, sounding a little like ZZ Top, whilst the title track is also an original, a meaty piece of electric Americana (riding a fine organ cushion from guest Eddie Rayner) and there is a further, slightly-unexpected cover in I Want You (She's So Heavy), yes, The Beatles' blues-rock number, the longest track here at five and a half minutes. These guys may be, as Brian describes them, "our little Whanganui band" (that's the name of their town), but I reckon they'll have a strong international presence soon! Yes, I am impressed.

NORMAN DARWEN

BURNING ROPE

SELF-TITLED

Independent



It can be very difficult for bands to emerge from the remnants of another band; there is no saying that the new collection of musicians will have the same fire and intensity as the old band. Sometimes it's hard to rekindle the familiar feeling, but that is not what has happened with Burning Rope. Emerging from the embers of Catfish and the loss of singer, songwriter, and guitarist Matt Long, Burning Rope has kept the core soul of what Catfish were all about and produced an album of fine material. Paul Long (Keys, Guitar and Vocals), Alex Voysey(Guitars), Adam Pyke (Bass), and Mitch Weaving (Drums) have all known each other for many years, but, as I attested to earlier, that is not a given that everything will gel. Now More Than Ever, the first track on the album, proves that this collection of musos are at the top of their respective games right now. The memory of Matt will always be embedded within the band; some of the songs are written about him and the loss felt by his father, Paul. This is not an album of gloomy material; it is an album of brilliant music. Have Mercy On The Criminal, is a song not written by any of the band. I looked at the credits and found to my surprise that it was, in fact, written by Elton John and Bernie Taupin. The guitar solo performed by Alex Voysey, I'm sure, would make Elton a very proud man. As well as the other members of the band, Burning Rope has recruited Chloe Josephine for backing vocals. The song, Anyway shows the magnificence of Chloe's vocal range and the songwriting genius of Paul Long. It reminded me ever so slightly of Pink Floyd. I digress, it is a beautiful tune. Tainted Love might not be on the tip of your tongue when you come to reflect on the music of Catfish; however, when you listen to the original song performed by Gloria Jones, it makes perfect sense. A wonderful rendition with Alex once again reminding everyone just how competent a guitarist he is. I can appreciate that this album was a difficult one to embark on, but Burning Rope carries the legacy that went before. Matt Long will be extremely happy.

> *unvarnished, unafraid, and burning bright against the dark*

STEPHEN HARRISON

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

BLUE DEAL

MAKE A CHANGE

Independent

With a title like Make A Change, Blue Deal signals ambition outright, and from the first notes of the opener, Another Reason, they deliver. Produced with galvanising intent, the album sees the band navigating blues-rock with both grit and grace, on these eleven well-crafted tunes, elevating what could have been self-conscious homage into something fresh and urgent. Songwriting centres on resilient optimism. Tracks brim with affirmations of personal and societal transformation, like the title track urging listeners to become the agents of change. The thematic arc is compelling: earnest lyricism, textured with philosophical heft, anchoring tracks that are as heartfelt as they are visceral. Blue Deal's strengths lie in their instrumental cohesion. Joe Fischer's vocals, rugged and resonant, cut through layered arrangements with conviction, recalling stalwarts like Paul Rodgers without ever veering into mimicry. Tom Vela's guitar work, meanwhile, is deftly melodic and unapologetically expressive, shifting seamlessly from punchy riffs to blues-laden solos that sting with emotional clarity. Rhythmically, the band swings with a potent, cross-generational energy. The rhythm section lays down grooves that feel both retro and relevant, pushing the album forward while grounding its blues DNA in modern sensibility. Whilst slow raw bluesy tunes like, Over Jordan shows the bands' harmonious side. The release doesn't reinvent the wheel, but it does wield it like a rallying tool, blues-rock that pulses with sincerity, craft, and a timely call to action. For fans seeking music that's as soulful as it is stirring, Blue Deal's latest offering hits the mark with style and substance.

COLIN CAMPBELL

CONNOR SELBY

THE TRUTH COMES OUT EVENTUALLY

Mascot

Connor Selby is an up-and-coming UK artist who performs a rootsy sound which incorporates both Soul and Blues influences. During the past five years he has received numerous nominations in the UK Blues awards for both his Guitar playing (Acoustic and Electric) and his Vocal, which really remind me of the late Chris Youldon post his Savoy Brown stint there is some gruffness in his vocal delivery that demands your attention. The opening track, Someone, sets the groove for the rest of the album with some thrilling lead guitar solos and plaintive vocals, supported with a full band backing, including Horns. While the majority of the album follows this pattern, there are a couple of exceptions like the Folksy song, Amelia which is fully acoustic, as is the final track Songbird which includes a delicate duet vocal from Georgia van Etten. Interestingly Connor has recently toured with Robert Cray whose clean and expressive Guitar tone I have always admired. It is still early days, but you can hear this style being replicated by Connor to great effect. One highlight is on the title track which mixes some blistering guitar solos, accompanied with a superb

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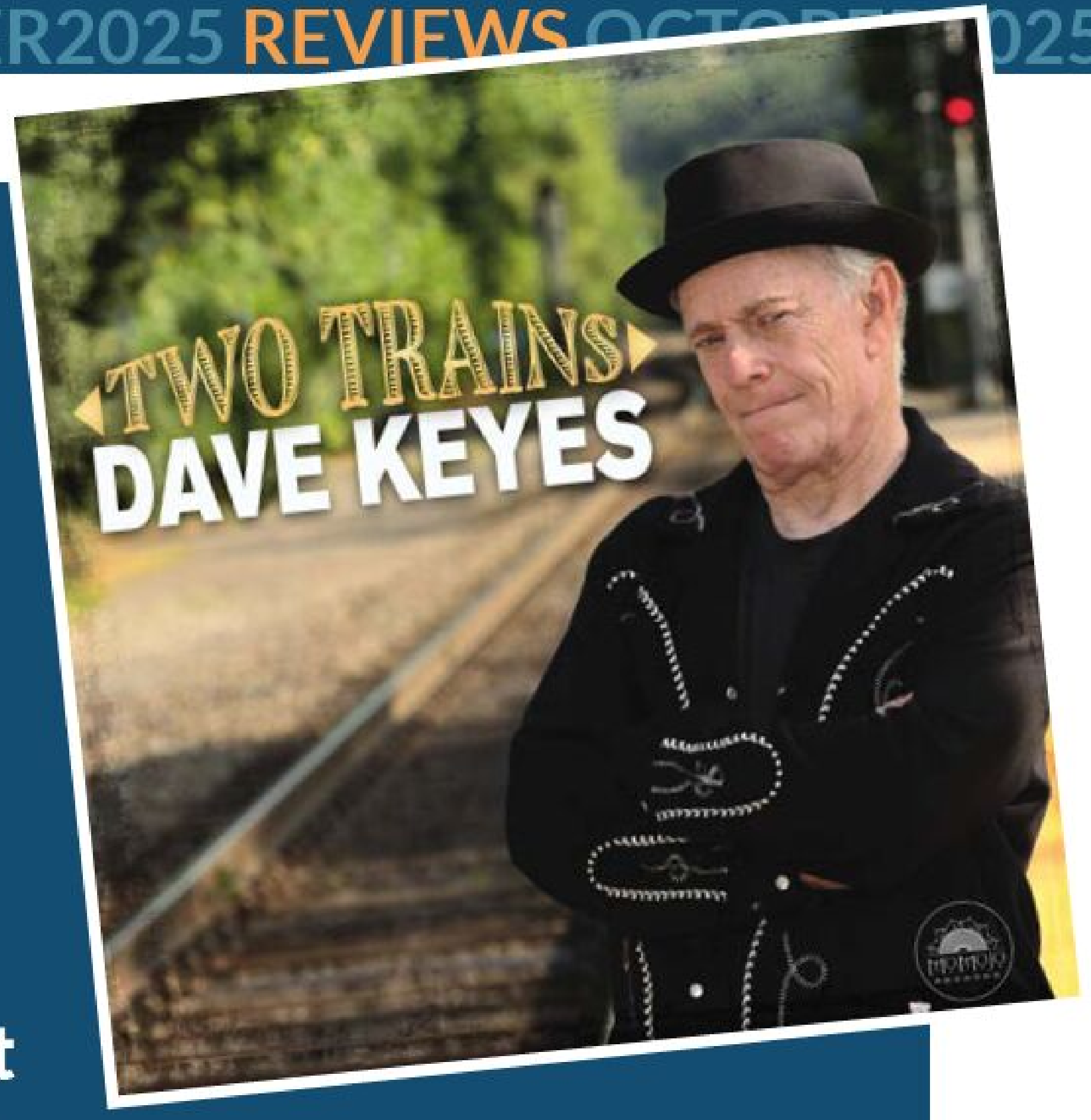
DAVE KEYES

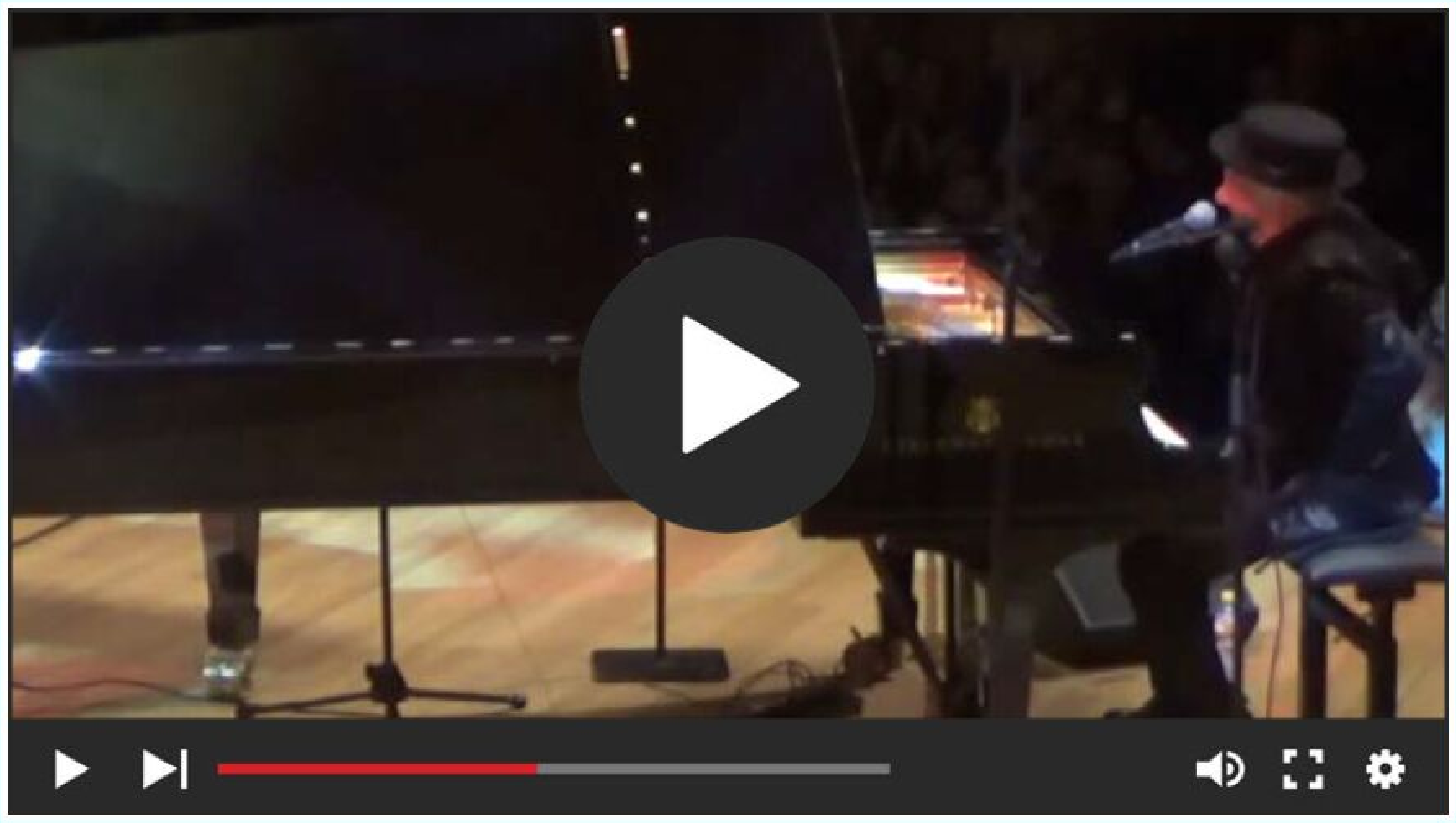
TWO TRAINS

MoMojo Records



Dave Keyes' Two Trains is a masterclass in contemporary blues storytelling, co-written on eight of its ten tracks with Nashville ace Mark Sameth, whose credits include Loretta Lynn and Bettye LaVette. From the opening bars of Blues Ain't Lookin' For You, the album exudes swagger, propelled by Keyes' boogie-woogie piano, John Putnam's sharp guitar licks, and Rob Paparozzi's harmonica magic. It's a groove-laden invitation to listeners of all types of music. Boogie Til The Cows Come Home keeps the energy rolling with rollicking boogie beats, while the title track, Two Trains, captures the album's heartbeat: two journeys intersecting, sometimes colliding, sometimes harmonising. I'm Alright, leans gospel, with Alexis P. Suter and Vicki Bell's backing vocals lending warmth and authenticity, before the full band kicks into a soulful groove. Keyes shines on A Long Way From Right, Right Now, a raw, emotionally charged number where harmonica punctuates his searing vocals and piano. What Just Happened delivers sharp social commentary, wrapped in upbeat rhythms, while Boogie For Patty is a tender, cathartic piano instrumental, a homage to his late wife. Worried In Mind Blues pairs Woody Mann's vocals and guitar with Dave for a stripped-down, authentic blues moment. Throughout this release, Keyes bridges blues, soul, rock 'n' roll, and even a hint of country, demonstrating that the genre's flame is alive and well. This album isn't just a collection of songs, it's a journey through life's collisions and harmonies, told with swing, grit, and the kind of storytelling that keeps the blues pulse beating strong.

> *keeps the blues pulse beating strong*



COLIN CAMPBELL

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

vocal. The supporting musicians put in a good shift with Hammond Organ player David Limina, a standout with his work on It Hurts To Be In Love, a song that has a strong Stax feel to it and is the only cover on the album. This is Connor's third album release and is real statement. you feel he is at the stage where 'the “world is his oyster' as he is an all-encompassing artist who is comfortable in all Roots styles of music and writes some excellent thought-provoking songs.

ADRIAN BLACKLEE

DOC BOWLING AND HIS BLUES PROFESSORS

SING THE AMERICAN SONGBAG VOLUME 1

Independent

Nearly a dozen classic American Blues numbers, whether you want to put them into the folk, Swing, Country Blues or Americana idioms. And all performed by a group of highly skilled musicians without an ounce of the grit or rough edge of the musicians that would have recorded these tunes originally. That sounds harsh but the artists that made this music in the early days of the 20th century would almost to a man have been poor and Black and these songs come over here as utterly middle class and white. The playing is sublime, and the band do have their own take on the songs, these are not slavish copies of the music that was laid down back then, but they do remain faithful to the styles of the inter-war periods. The outfit consist of Ben 'Doc' Bowling on lead vocals, acoustic guitar, resonator and harp with Donnie Burke on lead guitar and resonator, Simon Minney on acoustic bass, Roger Chapman on drums, cajon and percussion – all supplying backing vocals. Johannes Bowling plays Alto sax, Mlle Chat Noire (Sophie Loyer) plays violin, Jens Skwirblies is on piano accordion, Kenny Bruno plays piano and Eamonn McLeever supplies the six-string banjo. Some of the songs on here are the expected fare for these collections - Going Down The Road (Feeling Bad), St James Infirmary Blues, Irene, Good Night – but there are a fair number that would not have been expected such as Cotton-eyed Joe (I certainly did not realize it was over a hundred years old), I Wish I Was A Mole In The Ground and Keep On The Sunny Side – not numbers I would associate with the genre. They play with styles and genres and definitely enjoy various 'conversations' between instruments, creating a fresh take on most of the songs. Notwithstanding my comments about how middle-class this collection is, it certainly is engaging and very well played and presented.

ANDY SNIPPER

LISTEN TO THE BLUES MATTERS

PODCAST

Listen to some amazing interviews with the artists we've been lucky enough to speak to for the magazine. **NOW ON YOUTUBE!**

KENNY NEAL

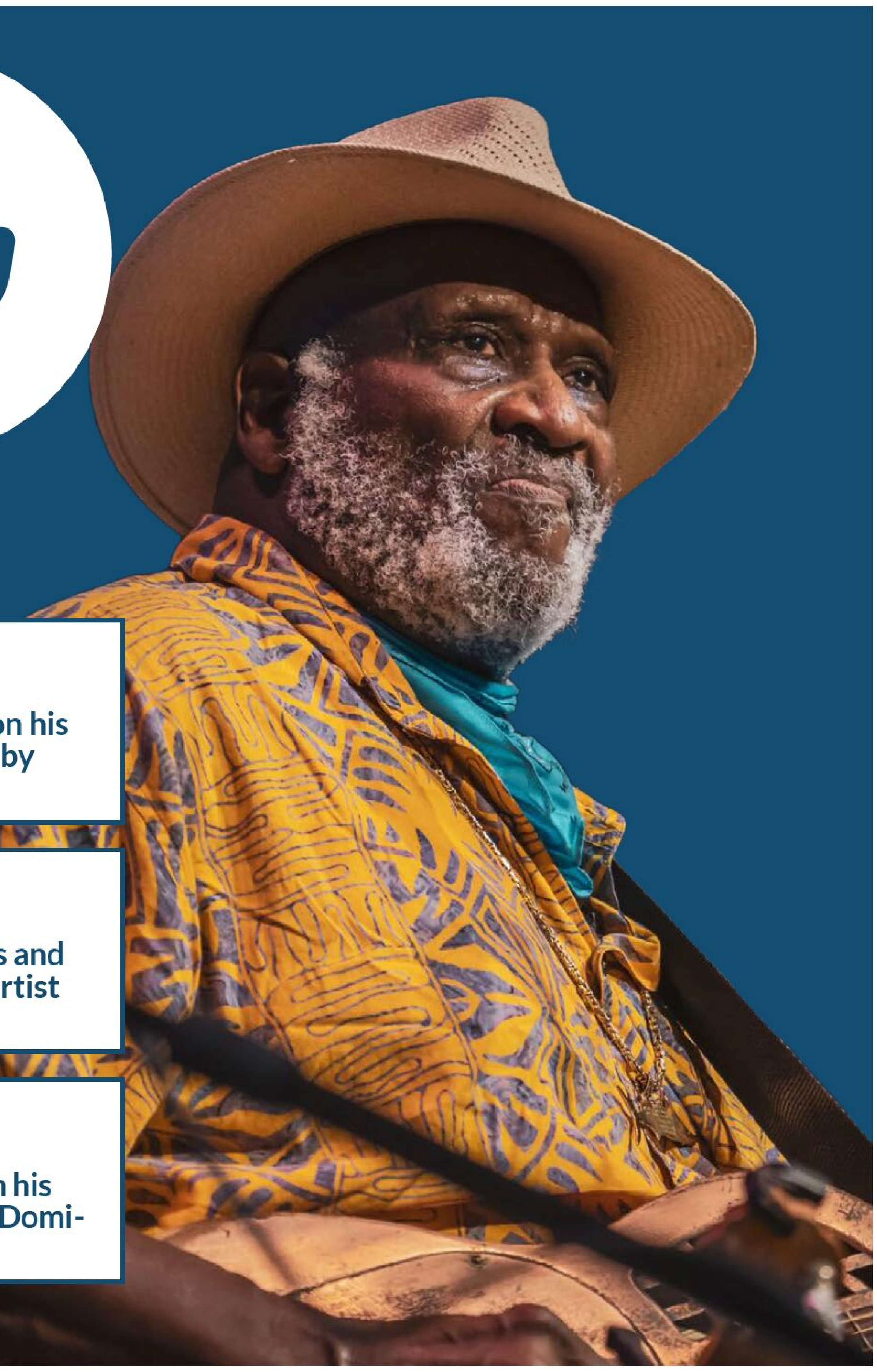
In this relaxed chat with Stephen Harrison, Kenny reflects on his early days playing with Buddy Guy, growing up surrounded by blues legends.

TAJ MAHAL

We sit down with one of the most legendary figures in blues and world music-Taj Mahal. At 82 years young, this pioneering artist continues to defy expectations...

MITCH WOODS

Mitch recalls how hearing boogie piano as a child set him on his path, shares the story of recording with the legendary Fats Domino band for Big Easy Boogie.



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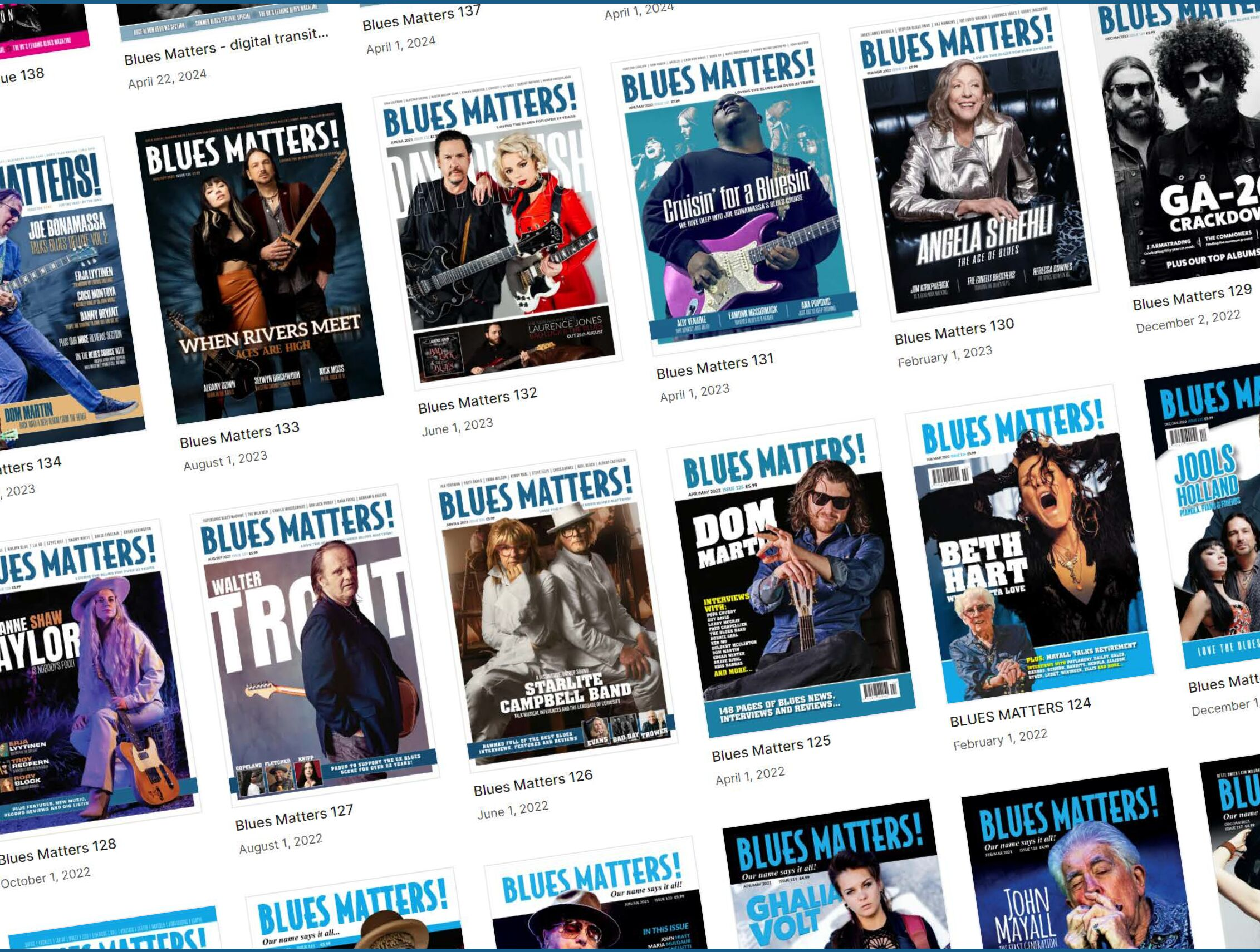
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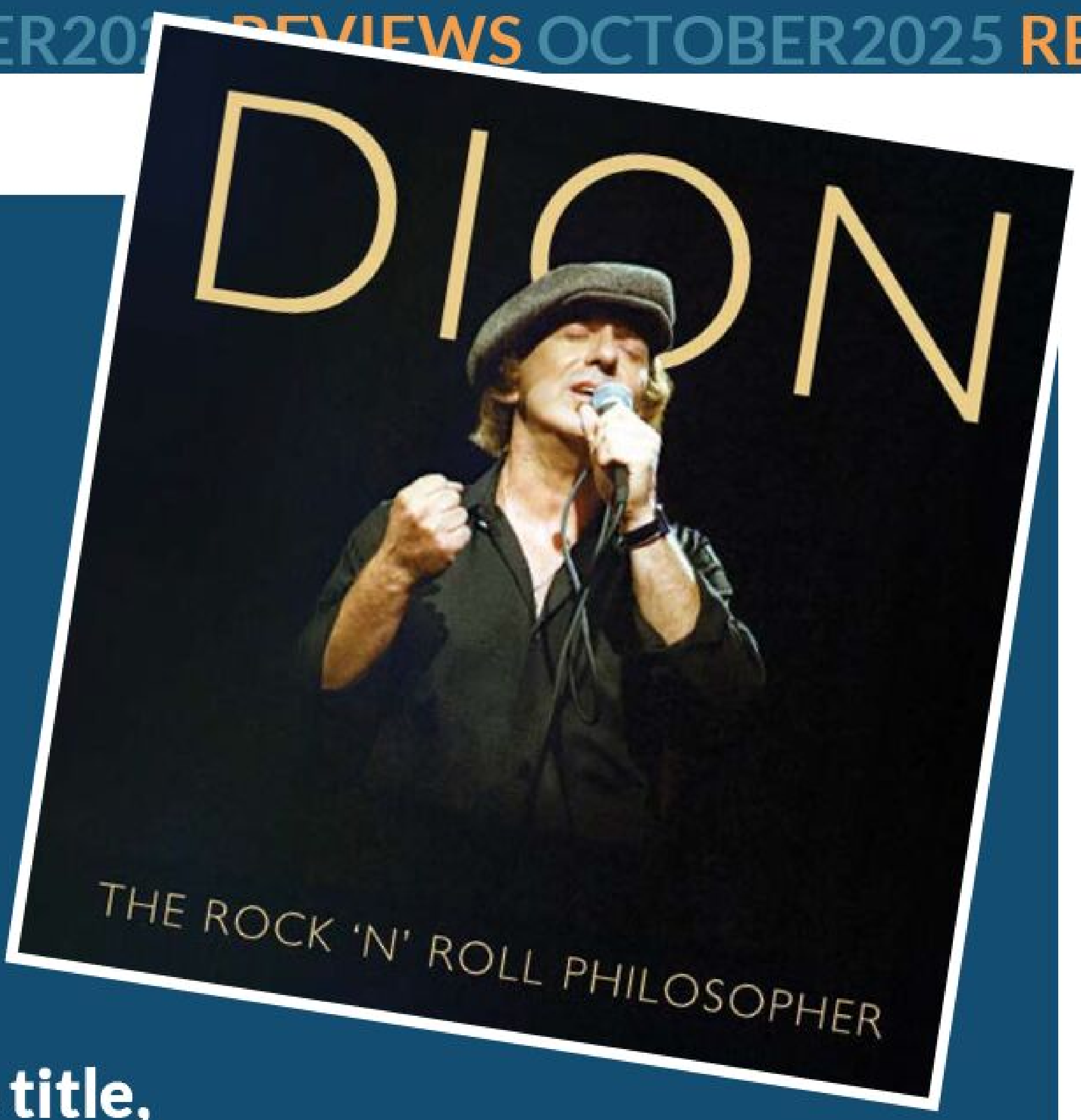


DION

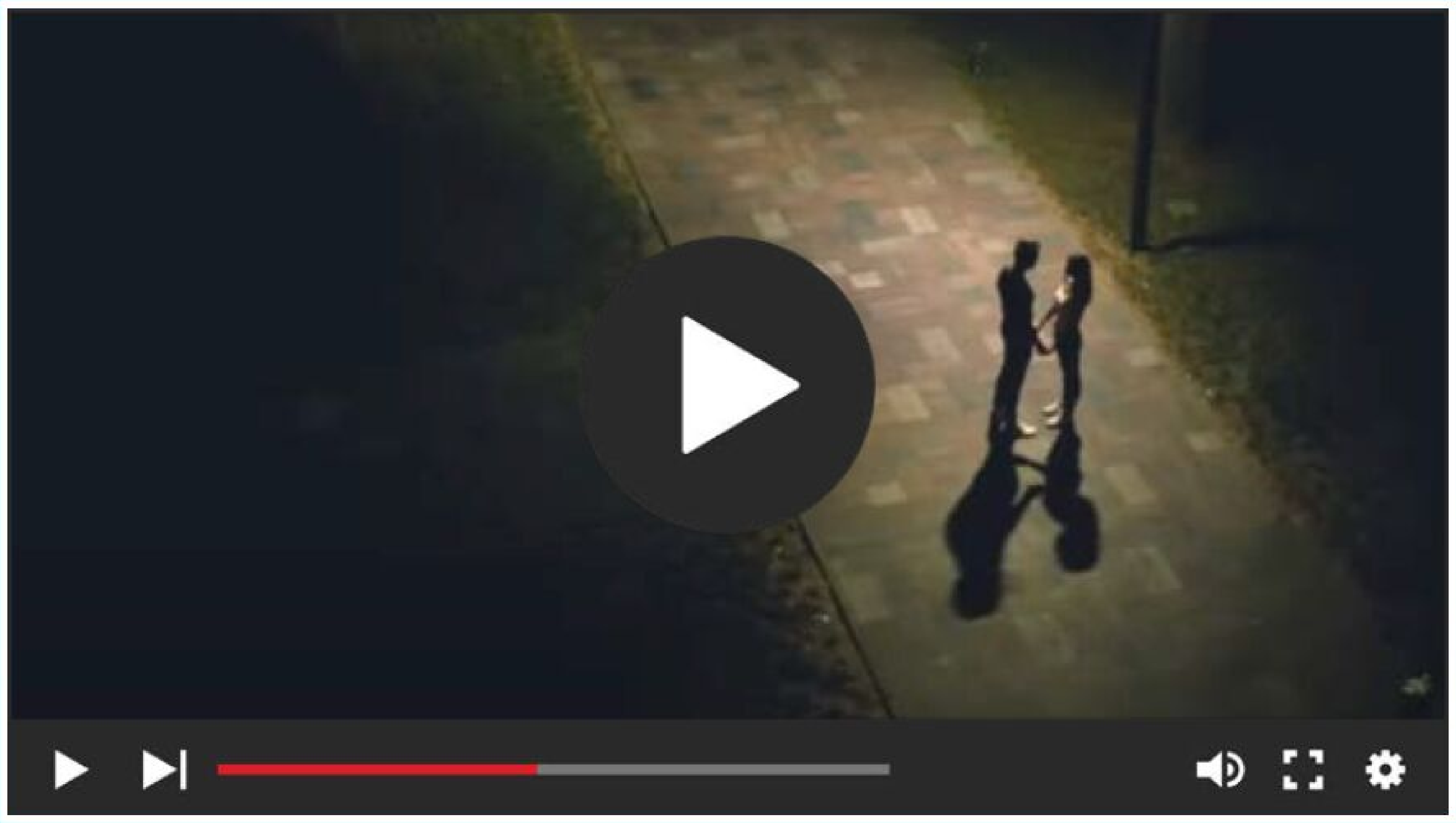
THE ROCK'N'ROLL PHILOSOPHER

KTBA Records

This new release serves as the companion to Dion's recent book of the same title, co-written with Adam Jablin, and it captures both the highs and lows of a career spanning six decades. The record blends newly recorded material with reimagined classics and a handful of standout collaborations that showcase Dion's ability to keep pushing his sound forward without losing touch with his roots.

> *one of New York's finest continues to create with passion and purpose*

I'm Your Gangster of Love opens proceedings with Dion's trademark rhythmic vocal style, while New York Minute, co-written with Scott Kempner, offers a timeless evocation of his home city. Elsewhere, Cryin' Shame features Sonny Landreth's fiery slide, Take It Back pairs Dion with Joe Bonamassa for a hard-driving rocker, and Dancing Girl finds Mark Knopfler weaving his unmistakable guitar tone into the mix. Eric Clapton turns up on If You Wanna Rock N Roll, adding weight to a track that reinforces Dion's rock credentials.



Alongside new takes on classics like Runaround Sue, The Wanderer and Abraham, Martin and John, the album also revisits Little Kings-era material such as King of the New York Streets and In a Heartbeat of Time. Closing with the acoustic ballad Mother and Son, Dion delivers a heartfelt reminder that his voice remains as emotive and commanding as ever. The Rock'n'Roll Philosopher is both a reflection of a storied past and proof that one of New York's finest continues to create with passion and purpose.

STEVE YOURGLIVCH

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

JT LAURISTEN & THE BUCKSHOT HUNTERS

STILL BE FRIENDS

Hunter Records

Thirty years after these guys released their debut album, here they are with what could be described as a sort of trip down memory lane with a bunch of old friends. Some of these old friends are very well-known musicians in their own right: Delbert McLinton, Curtis Salgado, and Mike Farris. Seeing the names filled me with confidence that this album was going to be something of a musical gem. Guess what? I was right. The album kicks off with, How Come My Bulldog Don't Bark, a tad unusual for a song title, but one hell of a tune, and the perfect opener. The title track is a silky mix of Soul and Blues, which pretty much sums up what this band is all about, and what makes this collection of songs so appealing. As I mentioned earlier, friends of the band were invited to put their creativity into certain tunes. Delbert Mclinton takes over the vocal duties for the Country twinged, When Rita Leaves. This is a brilliant track, Mclinton adding all his knowledge and know-how to make another flawless tune. Having a horn section, in my mind, increases the Soul and funk ingredients immensely in any band, and this one in particular is no exception. Horns add swing and groove, taking everything up a couple of notches. The final song, Taking Time puts me ever so slightly in mind of Van Morrison. It has that feel, sweet Soul with lots of melody, a magnificent way to bring the curtain down. I enjoyed the album, no, I loved the album.

STEPHEN HARRISON

JAY HOOKS

TEQUILA AND BULLETS

Independent

On his newest release, Jay Hooks captures that gritty and powerful Texas sound that we have become familiar with over the years on these ten tracks. The title track, Tequila And Bullets, digs deep. Hooks slows the pace, sharpening his lyrics into hard truths while his six-string burns behind them. It's blues noir; dark, smoky, unforgettable. That mood carries into A Woman Like You, a Gulf Coast tale of danger and desire, where his solo lifts the song into the stratosphere. From the first wail of Jay Hooks' guitar on Evinrude Boat Motor, it really lures the listener in. Who knew a boat motor could drive a blues song with that kind of grit. Hooks tears into the strings with ferocity, his rhythm section laying down a deep-pocketed groove that lets him soar. There's a bow to Johnny Winter on the raw relentless tune, Lonesome. That same intensity fuels Your Touch, a scream from the soul, and Left Me Cold, is a stripped-down rock-blues confession. Hooks proves he can groove with Mind Full, a slow burner heavy with modern blues fire, and turn back the clock with Mississippi Sheiks, a surreal nod to the past. Even the provocatively titled Redneck Shit, rips with Gulf Coast grit, while I Was Wrong shows his vocals carry as much truth as his guitar. The set closes with Mexican Larry, a haunting, poetic blues that bleeds emotion. Jay Hooks isn't just playing the blues, he's living them. This record feels like the moment he breaks out from the pack.

COLIN CAMPBELL

THE JOHNNY OTIS BLUES CARAVAN

THE DUKE / PEACOCK SESSIONS PART ONE – 1952-1954

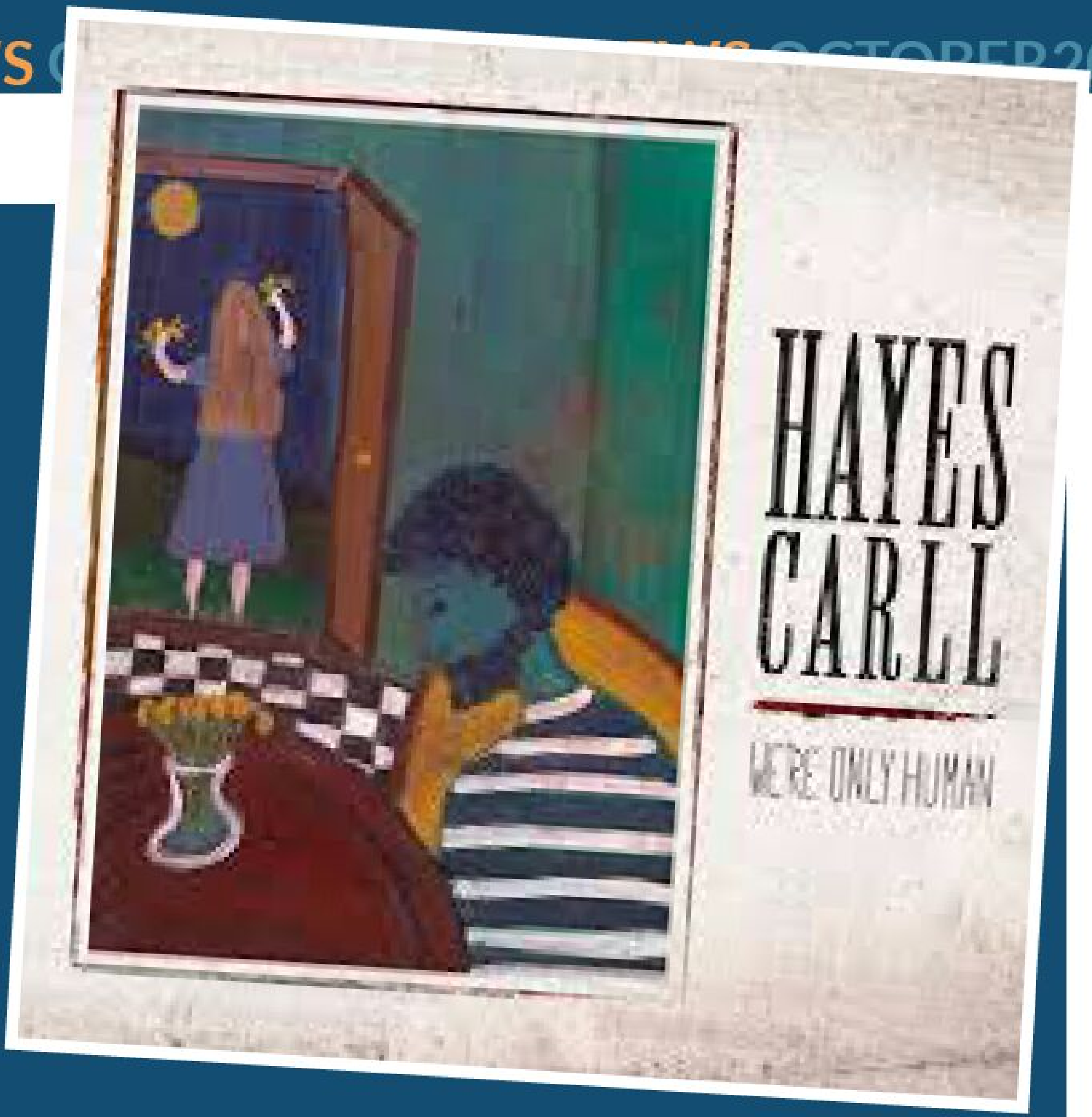
JASMINE RECORDS

Johnny Otis reversed a particular trend among early Black R'n'B musicians – instead of allowing people to think he was white, despite being born of Greek immigrant par-ents, used his swarthy complexion to foster the perception that he was actually black. This vintage collection of Otis' sides for the famous Peacock label kicks off with three wham-bam cuts from Otis' discovery

HAYES CARLL

WE'RE ONLY HUMAN

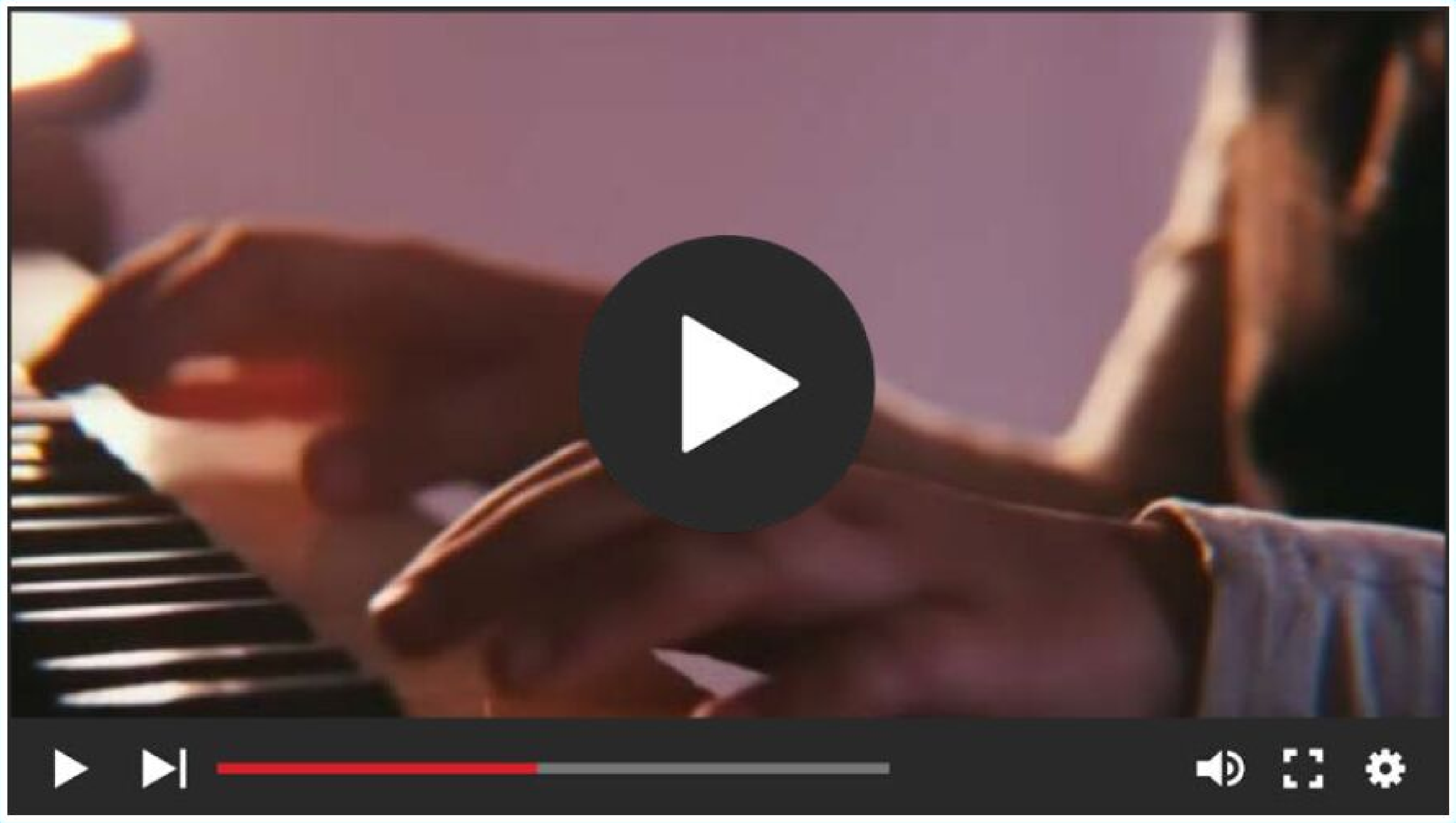
Hwy 87 Records



Hayes Carll's We're Only Human is more than a record; t's a reflection, a reckoning, and a reminder that art works best when it hits you in both the head and the heart. Carll, a songwriter's songwriter, sharpens his craft here with the kind of grace and grit that feels lived-in, like a long night's confession at closing time. The title track sets the tone with plaintive piano and Carll's steady, sincere voice laying down the truth: we all stumble, we all hide, and we all seek forgiveness. That theme of flawed humanity ripples through the record. Stay Here A While, co-written with MC Taylor of Hiss Golden Messenger, shines like a rare moment of stillness, carried by mandolin and gentle percussion. It's Carll learning to sit still, breathe, and appreciate the world outside his own restless mind. Humour hasn't left the man, though, Progress of Man (Bitcoin and Cattle) skewers modern absurdities with Carll's trademark wit, while Good People (Thank Me) proves that gratitude can be funny, sharp, and deeply human all at once. Yet for every wry smile, there's a gut-punch of honesty. I Got Away with It, drips with bluesy regret, while What I Will Be and One Day push toward hope, reminding us that peace comes with acceptance and self-trust. Carll closes this musical journey with May I Never, a chorus of old friends lending their voices to a promise of persistence. It's humbling, heartfelt, and deeply communal. This release lands as a work of bruised beauty, an album of reckoning that leaves you lighter, stronger, and grateful.

> *an album of reckoning that leaves you lighter, stronger, and grateful*

COLIN CAMPBELL



LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

– the legendary Big Mama Thornton. Destined to carve a reputation as one of the greatest blues shouters of the genre, Mama blos-somed under Otis's band direction, and included here is the 'proper' version of Lieber & Stoller's Hound Dog, a sleazy sexy slinky tale of an abandoned woman telling her feckless lover where the door is. It's not the pale sanitised mimsy version that Elvis released – his was a cover of a cover from lounge band Freddie Bell And The Bell-boys. This is the original, all sass character, the jewel in Mama's crown, one of eleven sides in this set. There is plenty of variety in terms of vocal interpretations and styles, Johnny Ace's Please Forgive Me has an almost mainstream radio backing to it, sitting comfortably alongside Johnny Otis' smooth vocal sound on Rock Me Baby. The major surprise comes with a really early Little Richard sounding uncharacteristically subdued on Maybe I'm Right from future Rock And Roll screamer and all-round legend, Little Richard. The voice is unmistakable, but the delivery is much softer and damaged, no sign of the swagger and pomp that was to come later. Following on is Directly From My Heart To You, which belies its big band backing from Otis's musicians, and is a straight-down-the-line blues, broken heart and all. It's collections like this, unearthing the early works of future legends of the form that makes historians of the Blues so pleased that someone takes the time and trouble to find and collate these potentially forgotten gems that are preserved for current and future generations of blues aficio-nados. From such beginnings, came the Blues we know and love, albums like this help make the picture complete.

ANDY HUGHES

KATIE SPENCER

WHAT LOVE IS

Lightship Records

I wasn't sure what to expect when this album dropped through the letterbox, as I must confess that I had not heard much about Katie Spencer until now. The opening track, which incidentally is the title track, filled the room with one of the most angelic vocals that I've ever heard. The songs on the album are laden with soft, sweet lyrics and wonderful music. I immediately began to feel a sense of peace and tranquility. Now, you may say that this is not in any way, shape, or form what you want to hear from a Blues album, and you would be correct. This is Americana at its finest, a blend of Country, Folk, and a sprinkling of pop music. Americana strays into the mainstream of many genres; it has been doing so since the 60s. Listening to What Love Is reminded me of early Joni Mitchell, clever lyrics, and meaningful tunes. It Was Then That I Knew Love captures the mood perfectly, haunting, almost serene in its makeup, bringing out the best in Katie's vocals with an acoustic guitar that could have been played in a church. I have waxed lyrical about Katie's vocals, and quite rightly so, but let's not forget the wonderful musicians on here, who all bring something to the table. If you want a Blues album, then this is not for you; however, if you want melodic, sweet songs that give you a peaceful, easy feeling (I've heard that somewhere before), then this is right up your musical alley. Americana has produced another gem, Katie Spencer.

STEPHEN HARRISON

KELLI BAKER

GRANITE

Gulf Coast Records

The funky grooves of Noe Socha (guitar/harmonica), Tom Curiano (drums), PJ LaMariana (bass) and Derek Dupuis (keys) on opener Silk Flowers lay the foundation for Baker's sultry tones as she tells of a relationship battle. Her passionate vocal hits home – 'Don't try to cross a woman whose heart beats at half-time... you can't hide'. Socha excels on blues harp. The groove continues for Right On Time led by Socha's guitar. Meanwhile Baker takes on a darker tone – 'woke up feeling chains break around my chest'. The rhythm enhancing the mood further. Baker's vocal soars on the chorus 'burning, yearning'. The temperature rises but the gathering intensity sends chills down your spine. Socha adds fuel to the fire with a crescendo of guitar breaks. Baker enjoyed a close relationship with her father who can be heard praising his daughter in the brief voicemail that makes up The Call. Sadly, Baker was absent when she lost her father suddenly. Granite (Badlands) tackles this difficult subject dealing with grief and close personal loss it takes us to a place where those close to us once were. Socha's harp sets a sombre scene enhanced by his acoustic guitar. Baker's vocal is stunning and full of undiluted emotion. Such an Incredible tribute. Socha's harp/guitar duet is beauty personified. Baker turns her attention to American folk with a stunning rendition of Where Did You Sleep Last Night made famous by Lead Belly. The strings and harmonica set a bleak scene which Baker revels in. The perfect vehicle for Baker at her darkest yet. The mood lifts for the upbeat jazz like swing of Love In The Sheets. Baker is a bundle of joy as her powerful voice is carried along on an orchestral tidal wave of keyboards. Only the most confident of vocalists would attempt to cover The Allman Brothers' Whipping Post. Kelli Baker steps up to the plate – with a euphoric rush of vocal power she provides the exclamation mark at the end of an EP that is sure to make the music world sit up and pay attention.

TAF ROCK

LAURA EVANS

OUT OF THE DARK

Independent

Unbeknownst to me, Laura Evans is not just a great singer; she is also an accomplished actress to boot. But she is better known for her singing and songwriting, and for that, I am eternally grateful. Out Of The Dark is a collection of twelve songs that highlight her amazing vocals, whether it be in a Blues/Rock style or in a Country/Blues style. Both genres sit equally well with Laura, which is evident in the opening track, Wherever You Are. Her raspy, gravelly voice cuts through the tune with relative ease as if to say, "I'm here, this is what I do." That is something that I find incredibly appealing in artists, not trying to play it safe, not caring if you make a mistake. Laura Evans has that self-belief in spades. The switch between Country Blues and Blues Rock sometimes happens within the same song, a slight twist of a note, and off she goes. Heartbreaker is a prime example of what I'm talking about, a monumental song. If they are thinking of releasing a single from this album, please let it be this one. It packs a huge punch, both vocally and musically. Sometimes, when we focus on the singer's range, whether it's male or female, we can be guilty of overlooking the musicians who also play a big role in the making of the album. The musos on here, spectacular. I think that we will be hearing a lot about Laura Evans in the very near future. I believe that this album will become a milestone in her career. Country/Blues and Blues/Rock have another artist who is knocking firmly on the door. You heard it here first.

STEPHEN HARRISON

LIL RED & THE ROOSTER

7

Independent

Lil' Red & The Rooster's latest full-length release, 7 is a deeply satisfying journey that feels both rooted in tradition and daring enough to stretch beyond it. Blues, gospel, and soul fold into each other with grace across the album, and the whole thing pulses not just with nostalgia, but with lived experience. From the opening track Wild's Rising, there's an aura of uplift: sweeping harmonies, an almost hymnal quality in the backing vocals. On guitar, Pascal Fouquet acts as a transatlantic translator, his playing a seamless dialogue between continents. He draws on the raw, soulful phrasing of American blues, bending notes with a voice-like cry, then tempers it with the sophistication and lyrical finesse of Parisian swing. It sets the tone for an album concerned not just with sound, but with the emotional labour of perseverance. Standout cuts like Stack 'Em Up Baby with Bobby Floyd on keys demonstrate the band's ability to slow things down without losing momentum. A sultry, slow-burn blues number, it's textured with vintage swagger and modern intimacy there's a simmering tension in every note. Throughout the album, Lil' Red & The Rooster confronts hardship and transformation; they explore what it means to be free in spirit even when the worldly chains persist. Is This Heart Taken is a particular highlight with Jennifer Milligan's vocals whimsical and alluring. Production-wise, the album is warm and rich without ever being overproduced. Instrumentation feels organic, nothing feels superfluous. Vocals are front and centre when they need to be; the backing arrangements support without crowding.

COLIN CAMPBELL

ROBBIN KAPSALIS

THE BLUES IS IN THE HOUSE

Blues House Productions

Robbin Kapsalis plants her flag firmly in the tradition with her latest release The Blues Is In The House. Produced by harmonica ace and husband, Giles Robson and tracked at AGP Studio in Nozay, France, the album bears the sonic fingerprints of Arnaud Fradin and Albert Milauchian, with Fradin also overseeing mixing duties at Mojo Hand Studio. Giles' harmonica cuts through like a second voice, threading the record with raw, soulful urgency. The opener and title song penned by Terry Abrahamson (of Muddy Waters fame) and Derrick Porcell, is a barnburner with Joe Louis Walker on guitar, setting the tone with grit and fire. From there, Kapsalis digs into a treasure chest of blues standards and deep cuts, breathing life into Walter Jacobs' Up the Line, Deadric Malone's Lead Me On, a homage to Bobby "Blue" Bland, and L.C. Frazier's The Comeback, once immortalised by Memphis Slim. She tips her hat to tradition with Sittin' on Top of the World, the Mississippi Sheiks classic carried through Howlin' Wolf and beyond, and tears into Elmore James' Rollin' and Tumblin' with conviction. The rhythm section of Arnaud Gobin bass guitar and Cyril Durand on drums holds it all down tight, especially on the funky revival Love Hangover (Redux). Closing with Gotta Hear the Blues, Kapsalis makes her mission plain, this isn't nostalgia, it's testimony. After years fronting the D.C.-based Vintage#18, sharing stages with the likes of John Primer and Billy Branch, Kapsalis shows she's not just keeping the flame alive, she's fanning it higher. So, the blues is truly in the house.

COLIN CAMPBELL

TOM HAMBRIDGE

DOWN THE HATCH

Quarto Valley

Tom has been around the business for a very long time. During his career, as a pro-ducer, he has garnered four, yes four Grammy winning albums. Producing over 100 albums, Written over 1000 songs including Every Time I Sing The Blues for Eric Clap-ton and yet most folks, including myself, would be hard pressed to be aware of his name. So Tom has come out front (can drummers do that?) with a new album of his own songs also handling, very nicely, all the vocal duties. As you would realise with such a career you would expect him to have an address book with some top-notch players willing to join him in the studio. The results are very tasty indeed coming out of the starting gate with Willie Dixon's Gone originally found on a George Thorogood release. It's a belter setting the tone for what follows which really is deeply Blues based with lots of Rock and Roll overtones. The aforementioned Clapton song is a heartfelt tale of the feelings we have all experienced at some point dealing with what life throws at us. I Want You Bad says what it says on the tin. Ah the power of desire to love somebody! We then grind out the darker side in How Blues Is That and Hard Times. Making Lemonade with a smidgen of Zydeco is fun whilst the instrumental You Gotta Go Through St Louis drips with Chuck Berry riffs played here by Buddy Guy. Brilliant fun. Can't, of course, endorse the idea of Start Drinking Early Day but I guess you gotta do what you gotta do. I Wanna Know About You reminds me a bit of some Tom Petty cuts. A very polished album with no fillers.

GRAEME SCOTT

MARIA MULDAUR

ONE HOUR MA-MA-THE BLUES OF VITORIA SPIVEY

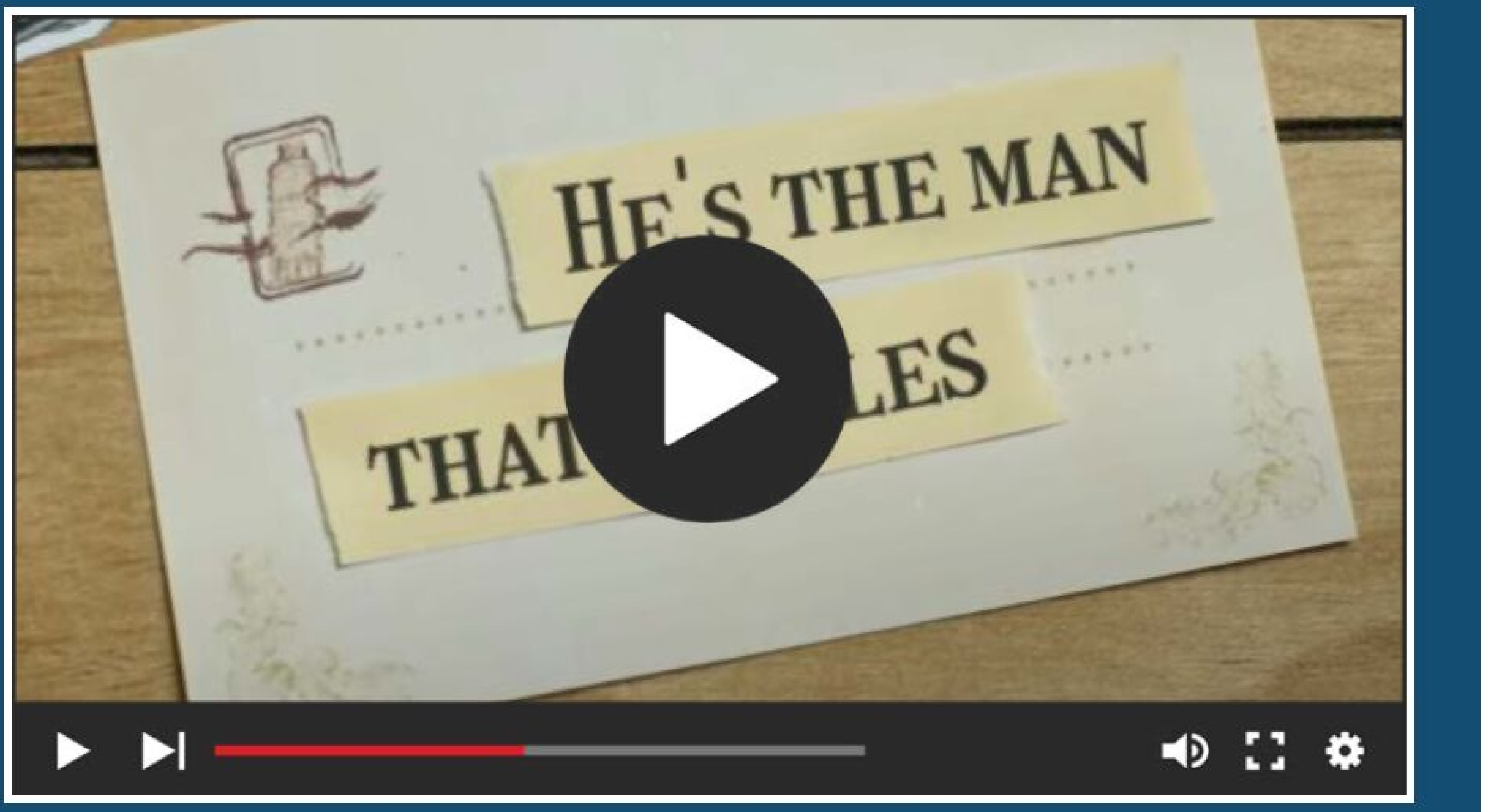
Nola Blues Records

One Hour Mama
~The Blues of Victoria Spivey~
Nola Blue Records
Maria Muldaur

For some unknown reason, the music of Victoria Sivey has been somewhat overlooked when it comes to female Blues singers. Thankfully, Maria Muldaur has come up with not so much a tribute album, but more of a trip down the Blues memory lane. Muldaur is 83 years old, but her vocals are still in fine fettle, her phrasing has lost none of its magic, and the choice of songs is impeccable. Spivey was not just a singer of Jazz, Blues, and Gospel; she was also a pioneer, being the first artist to have their own record label. Muldaur brings along a couple of guests, messers Elvin Bishop and Taj Mahal. Bishop duets brilliantly on the tune, What Makes You Act Like That, with Taj Mahal joining the festivities on, Gotta Have What It Takes. Seven of the twelve tracks were written by Spivey, including my favourite in this collection of songs, Dreaming Of You, a brilliant vocal by Muldaur, with the haunting lyrics of Spivey, and the accompaniment of a stellar line-up of musos. In the past, Spivey had been labelled " The Madonna Of The Blues," a title that I can fully understand as my age progresses. Boldness, toughness, and a sheer will to succeed, no matter what the cost. This, for me, is summed up perfectly in the song, One Hour Mama, with Maria Muldaur straining every sinew to do Spivey and the song justice. I said at the beginning of the review that Spivey has been somewhat overlooked when female Blues artists are mentioned, thanks to Maria Muldaur; that will become a thing of the past; in fact, it should be written into law.

> *an album of reckoning that leaves you lighter, stronger, and grateful*

STEPHEN HARRISON



LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

VERNON REID

HOODOO TELEMETRY

Artone/The Players Club Records

Vernon Reid has always carried the blues in his bones, even when his guitar is screaming through rock, funk, or avant-garde firestorms. With this new release, his first solo outing in over two decades, Reid channels that restless blues spirit into a 14-track journey that defies convention while keeping one foot planted in the tradition of storytelling, struggle, and soul. From the opening hiss of the opening bars to, Door of No Return, there's a sense of history echoing through the music; a reminder of ancestral pain carried forward. That thread runs deep in Reid's playing, even when he's bending genres until they shatter. Freedom Jazz Dance pulses with a groove as raw and unpolished as a backroom jam, whilst The Haunting drips with Prince-like soul but cuts through with guitar lines steeped in gospel grit and blues phrasing. Bronx Paradox bristles with New York energy, but it's Reid's sharp-edged tone, equal parts howl, and testimony, which roots it firmly in the blues tradition of resilience. On Politician and In Effigy, his commentary feels urgent and defiant, echoing the blues' long history of social truth-telling. Then there's Beautiful Bastard, the emotional core of the record: jagged, vulnerable, and as honest as a midnight confession. Hoodoo Telemetry is not a straight-ahead blues album by no means, but it's undeniably born of the blues. The result is music that challenges, surprises, and insists on being heard in his own uncompromising terms.

COLIN CAMPBELL

JAY HOOKS

TEQUILA & BULLETS

Joplin Street Music

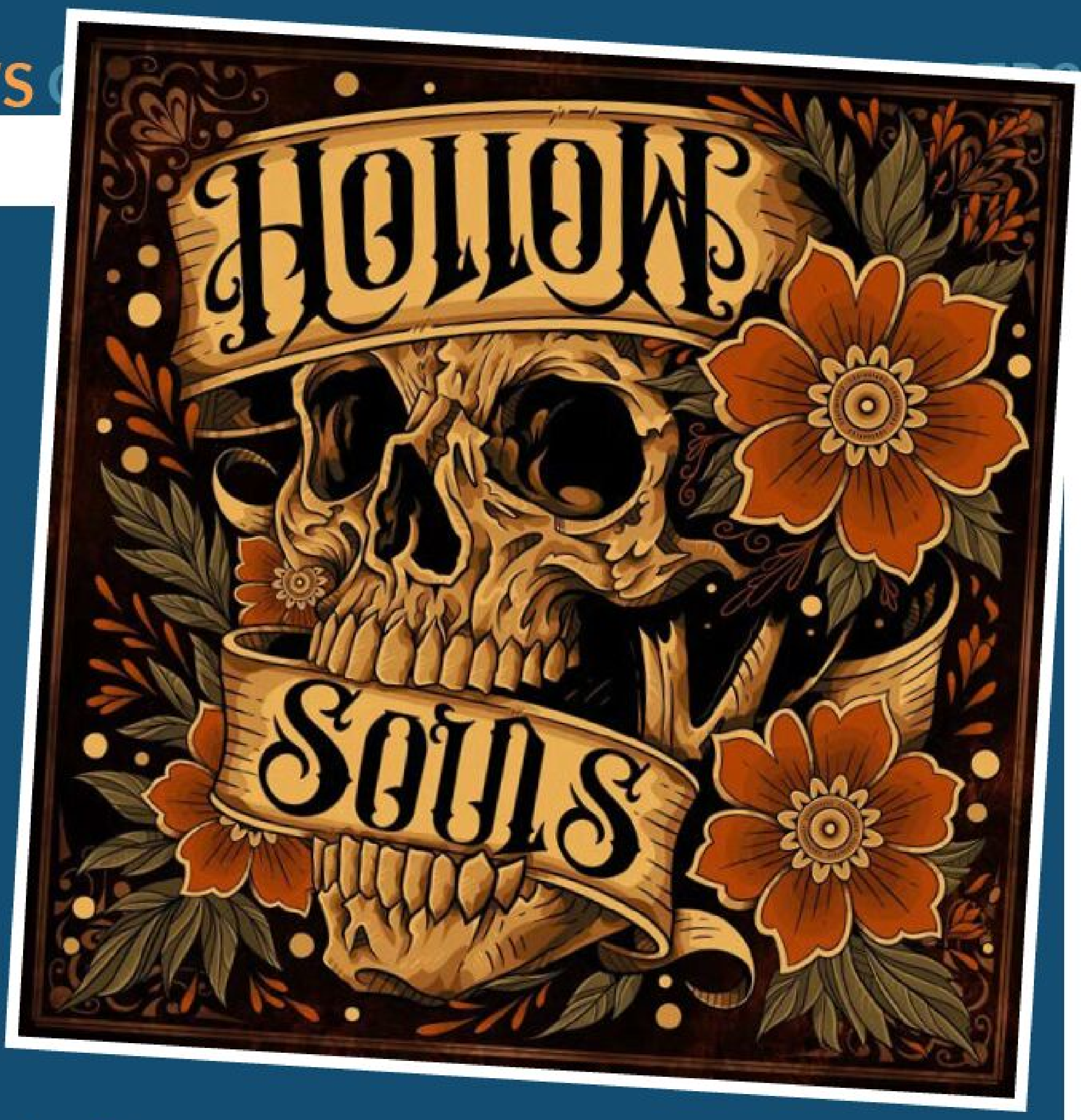
I first heard Jay Hooks on his self-titled Provogue Records release back in 2000 and was immediately struck by it. More than two decades later, that album still holds up as one of the finest slices of Texas blues rock around. This isn't generic rock with a few blues licks thrown in – it's authentic, raw and steeped in the tradition that gave us Winter, Vaughan, Bramhall, Collins, Gibbons and countless others. There really is something in the Texas water – or maybe the bourbon – that keeps producing players of this calibre. Tequila & Bullets marks Jay's comeback after a long absence since 2002's Red Line, and it doesn't disappoint. From the opening salvo of Evintude Boat Motor – a short, sharp burst of guitar fire – the album wastes no time in reminding us of his strengths. The title track follows, its cutting guitar lines driven by a rhythm section that keeps things locked in tight. A Woman Like You begins with a soulful Southern-flavoured intro before bursting into a chorus that demands a singalong, with Jay's soloing fitting perfectly into the groove. Lonesome captures the ghost of Johnny Winter, its vibe rolling naturally into Your Touch, which hits harder and throws in some Gibbons-inspired riffs for good measure. Left Me Cold eases back slightly but still delivers a classy slice of blues rock, Jay dropping notes into just the right spaces. Mind Full is Texas blues rock to the core, his vocals edged with shades of Rory Gallagher. That makes his choice of a cover all the more fitting – a powerful version of Rory's Mississippi Sheiks. The second half of the record shows his range. Red Neck Shit is pure roadhouse chaos, a barroom anthem that feels lived-in and loud. I Was Wrong slows things a notch but keeps the emotion high, before My Kinda Fine lifts us again with more sharp-edged Texas fretwork. The closer, Mexican Larry, is a standout – opening with a mariachi flourish before settling into a dark, reflective slow blues full of menace, regret and a sense of looming consequence. This is an album that burns with the same heat Jay brought to his early work, only with added maturity and depth. If Winter, Vaughan, Collins or Gibbons are in your collection, then this record belongs there too. Jay Hooks has returned with a vengeance, and Tequila & Bullets is proof that his place in the Texas blues rock tradition is secure.

STEVE YOURGLIVCH

HOLLOW SOULS

HOLLOW SOULS E.P.

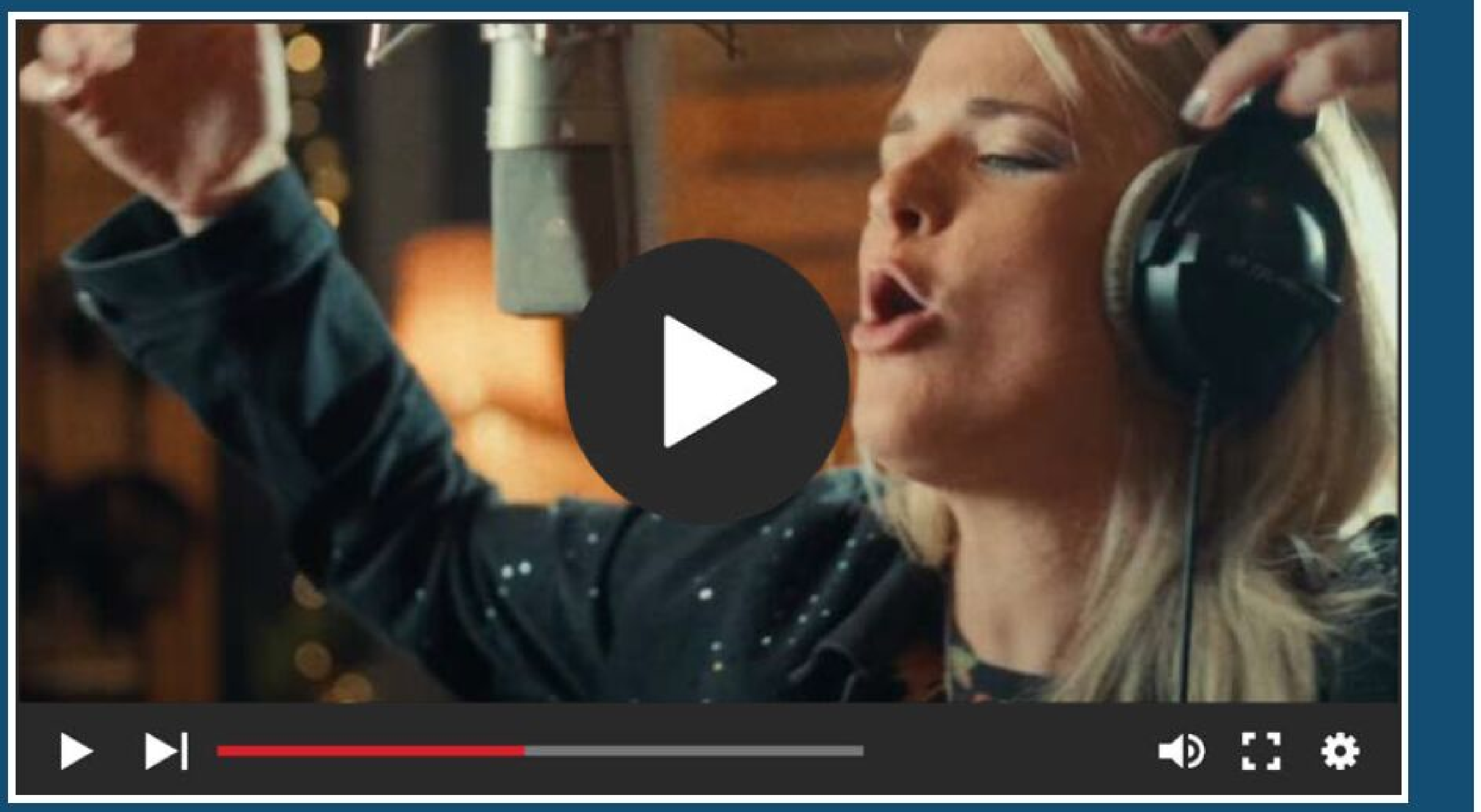
Independent



On their self-titled debut EP, Hollow Souls, a new collaborative band fronted by Kris Barras with a core of Joe Harris on drums, Josiah J Manning producer, and bass player, Leighton Allen plus a host of guests including Phoebe Jane, Elles Bailey, Jared James Nichols they prove themselves a band that understands the emotional depth of the blues while pushing its boundaries into darker, rock-driven territory. These six songs, channel raw honesty, and grit, blending traditional blues feeling with modern urgency. Borderline opens the release with a moody swagger, its riff-heavy groove is steeped in tension and release. The shared vocals provided by Phoebe and Jared ache with lived-in experience, cutting through with a powerful delivery. Bad Things leans into a swampy, ominous vibe, drenched in atmosphere. The rhythm section drives it forward with a relentless pulse, while the lyrics confront temptation and consequences featuring Chris Tapp. With the track, I Need the Fire, the band turns up the intensity. It's a stand-out track, a plea for passion and survival carried by searing guitar lines that burn with urgency. That same fire fuels, Burn It to the Ground, where the raw energy feels almost primal, capturing the cathartic release at the heart of the blues featuring Elles on vocals. Shotgun is a stomping number that recalls the spirit of roadhouse blues but sharpened with a modern bite featuring Jon Harvey. The closer, Chasing Ghosts, takes a more reflective turn, weaving haunting melodies with soulful delivery, leaving the listener with a lingering sense of yearning.

> *“ an album of reckoning that leaves you lighter, stronger, and grateful*

COLIN CAMPBELL



LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

Ruf
THE ZAC SCHULZE GANG
STRAIGHT TO IT

THE ZAC SHULZE GANG

STRAIGHT TO IT

Ruf Records

This three-piece band was formed just five short years ago in Gillingham, England. Since then, they have been performing and wowing audiences in the UK, Europe, and America. Now, that is some going in five years, many bands don't get a chance to have a crack at America, but that's exactly what has happened with these chaps. Zac Shulze (Guitar and Vocals), Ben Shulze (Drums), and Ant Greenwell (Bass) have released their debut album on Ruf Records, and I think that it has been one of the highly anticipated albums for many years. Straight To It has eleven tracks, each one a monumental offering of Blues/Rock. The Rocker opens up the proceedings and sets the tone for the next ten songs, high-energy, Zac playing and singing as though his very life depended on it. I Won't Do This Anymore has an intro that contains wonderful Harmonica, before unleashing furious Guitars, Bass, and thundering Drums.

> *Zac playing and singing as though his very life depended on it*

The tone does mellow slightly on, Angeline allowing Zac to show that he is not a one-trick pony when it comes to singing. I mentioned earlier that the band was only formed five years ago; in that time, they have established themselves as one of the most highly regarded Blues/Rock bands in the Western world. There is nothing not to like about Straight To It; in fact, I strongly recommend that you get a copy as soon as possible. You can thank me later.

STEPHEN HARRISON

LISTEN, WATCH AND DISCOVER MORE AT THESE ARTIST LINKS

ROBERT PLANT WITH SUZI DANN

SAVING GRACE

Nonesuch Records

Here we go again! Another truly surprising release from one of the absolute greats of modern music. A man with no musical boundaries, Plant is always a major player with a voice instantly recognised and a thrusting powerful presence. With this latest venture he is joined by a select bunch of musicians and a mix including perfect harmonies with Suzi Dann often at the forefront. While Plant has always been a rock god, he has often revealed a blues heart and with Saving Grace, he bares his blues soul on a superb album with covers of Memphis Minnie and what may be the standout track of the release, Blind Willie Johnson's 'Soul of a Man'. Other tracks are significantly roots in nature with a rattling folkie feel and an unexpected twist. Who'd expect this guy to deliver 'As I Roved Out', or 'I Never Will Marry,' for example? The harmonies with Suzi Dann may owe something to his previously acclaimed work with Alison Krauss or simply his deep understanding of what makes great music. Probably a combination of both aspects. With the evergreen anthem 'Gospel Plough' closing the 10-track album, the entire project ends on a fabulous high! It's all-too-easy to think about album of the year here and, as a fully-fledged release that took around six-years development, Saving Grace, for my money, readily hits that very spot and some!

IAIN PATIENCE

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IBBA TOP 40

INDEPENDENT BLUES BROADCASTERS ASSOCIATION

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Position	Artist	Album
1	BUDDY GUY	AIN'T DONE WITH THE BLUES
2	LARRY MCCRAY	HEARTBREAK CITY
3	MARIA MULDAUR	ONE HOUR MAMA: THE BLUES OF VICTORIA SPIVEY
4	ALICE ARMSTRONG	FURY & EUPHORIA
5	DEVON ALLMAN	THE BLUES SUMMIT
6	BLOOD BROTHERS	HELP YOURSELF
7	THE 251s	FROM THE FIVE
8	MIKE HENDERSON	LAST NITE AT THE BLUEBIRD LIVE
9	YATES MCKENDREE	NEED TO KNOW
10	JOHN CHRISTOPHER MORGAN	RIGHT ON TIME
11	MONSTER MIKE WELCH	KEEP LIVING 'TIL I DIE
12	TOM HAMBRIDGE	DOWN THE HATCH
13	RORY BLOCK	HEAVY ON THE BLUES
14	BIG SHOES	KING SIZE
15	CONNOR SELBY	THE TRUTH COMES OUT EVENTUALLY
16	THE NAME DROPPERS	COOL BLUE SHOES
17	KOKO TAYLOR	CROWN JEWELS
18	GARRY BURNSIDE	IT'S MY TIME NOW
19	JOHN FOGERTY	LEGACY: THE CREEDENCE CLEARWATER REVIVAL YEARS
20	CHANTEL MCGREGOR	THE HEALING
21	CHRIS VINCENT & THE RAW DEALS	GOOD CROOK
22	DEBBIE BOND	LIVE AT THE SONG THEATER
23	THE BONESHAKERS	LIVE TO BE THIS
24	MOTHER BLUES WITH GERALD MCCLENDON	SLEEPING WHILE THE RIVER RUNS
25	MATT EDWARDS	ARE YOU FREE EP
26	RYAN LEE CROSBY	AT THE BLUE FRONT
27	MICK SIMPSON	CHANGING TIMES
28	THE ALEXIS P SUTER BAND	JUST STAY HIGH
29	DEREK & THE DOMINOS	LAYLA & OTHER ASSORTED LOVE SONGS
30	JOHN ANGUS BAND	LIVE COVERAGE EP
31	EARL THOMAS	LIVE IN LONDON
32	JON HINES TRIO	MEMPHIS SUN BLUES
33	CANDICE IVORY	NEW SOUTHERN VINTAGE
34	MISTY BLUES	OTHER SIDE OF BLUE
35	CHAMBERS DESLAURIERS	OUR TIME TO RIDE
36	NEIL SADLER	PAST TO PRESENT
37	EVA CARBONI	THE BLUES ARCHIVES
38	RICHARD DILWYN WILLIAMS	ANVIL SAND
39	JOE BONAMASSA	BREAKTHROUGH
40	THE SWAPS	FAST TRAIN

★ ★ ★

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Rebecca Downes	Paul Lamb & The Kingsnakes	Alice Armstrong
Deborah Bonham Band	Ian Siegal	Sam Kelly's Station House
Mick McConnell & Blue Thunder	Malcolm Bruce Blues Band	Greig Taylor Band
Jack Austin Despy	Mississippi MacDonald Band	61 Ghosts
	Neil Sadler Band	Liz Jones & Broken Windows
	Tom Davies & The Bluebirds	The Fargo Railroad Co
	Brian Rawson Band	Ceri Justice & The Jury
	Jamie Porter Band	Sunday Acoustic Showcase

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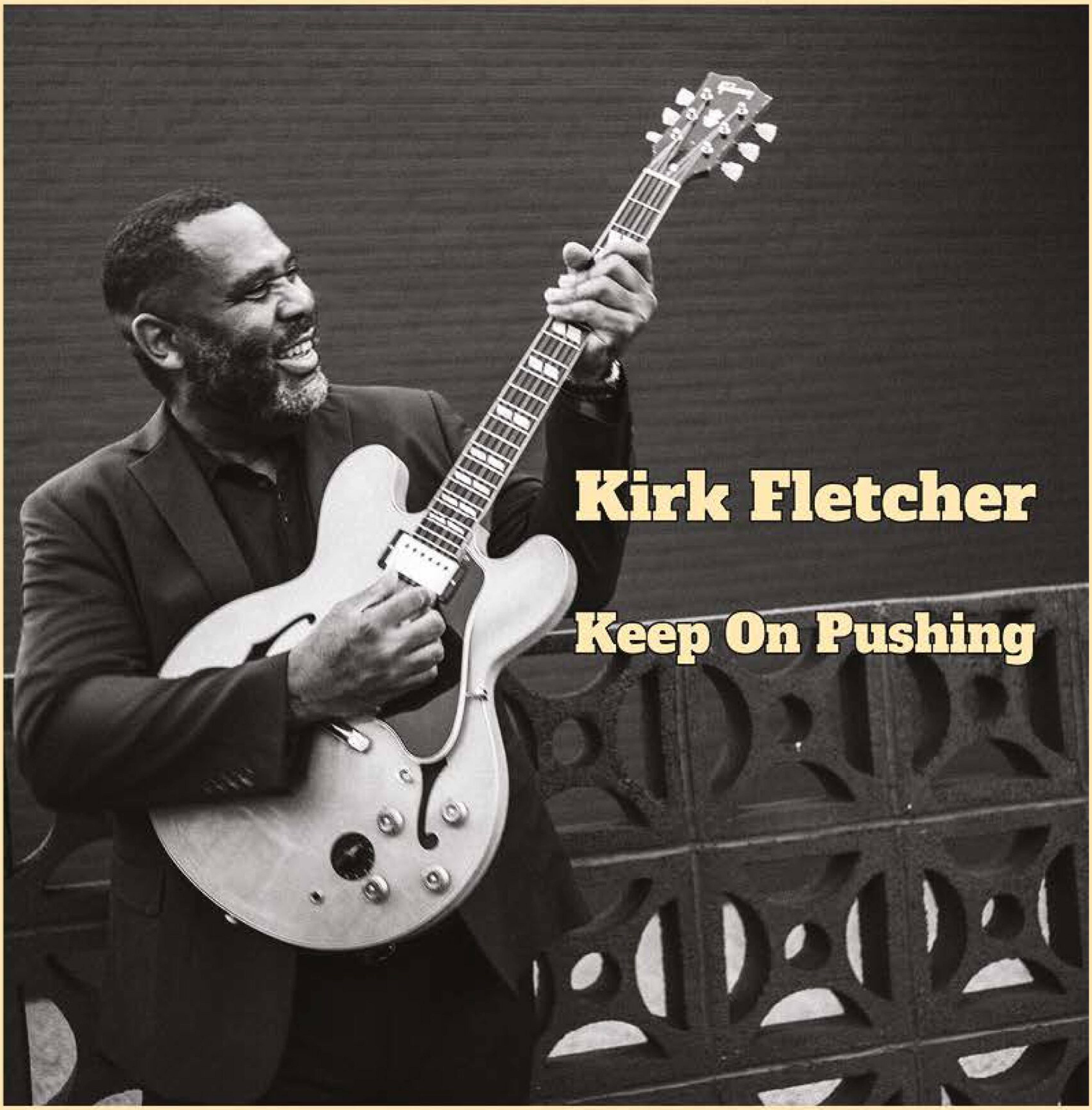
SCAN FOR TICKETS

KIRK FLETCHER

KEEP ON PUSHING



KEEP ON PUSHING is the latest from internationally hailed guitarist/vocalist Kirk Fletcher. Working with co-producer JD Simo and a dream team of Nashville players, Fletcher calls it "a positive message for these uncertain times we live in."

VizzTone
label group